

“Go, Show Yourselves to the Priest”

In the name of Jesus, by whom God has blessed us beyond measure, and through whom we give all thanks and praise to God our Father; dear friends in Christ: Like the many blessings God gives to us every day, we often times hear the familiar stories of Jesus applying his miraculous power for healing people with a certain amount of “ho hum” expectation. We take it for granted. “Yes, yes: Jesus meets some guys with leprosy and he heals them. He’s God. He can do that. What’s the big deal? You know, if he really wants to impress me he should come around some time when *I’m* sick and heal me.” Of course, our perspective would be quite a bit different if we had been one of those ten fellows we just heard about. If you had leprosy and were healed, I guarantee that you’d have something to be thankful for.

That’s because leprosy is, even today in some parts of the world, among the worst diseases imaginable. I have personally seen some forms of it while I was living in South America; but in preparing for this message, rather than simply take a commentator’s word, I did some research – and was shocked to find it was worse than I’d thought. It turns out that though leprosy is contagious, it is among the most difficult diseases to pass from one person to another. Unless the natural defense systems of the body are weakened by other illnesses, leprosy will usually only be passed by close, long term contact. The problem is that the disease has an incubation period of from one to thirty years. What that means is that you could have it and be passing it to others for thirty years before you ever had any symptoms of it yourself. You could catch it in infancy, and not know you had it until you already passed it on to your spouse and to all your children.

Leprosy (or Hansen’s Disease, as it’s now called) is caused by a certain bacteria that favors and attacks the cooler portions of the body: the skin, extremities such as fingers, feet and toes, ears, nose, lips, tongue, eyes; and internally, the entire upper respiratory system. The first thing it does is to destroy the nerves. That causes a loss of feeling, and eventually paralysis of the affected area. I read about one medical missionary who worked at the leper colony in Hawaii on the island of Molokai. One morning he was pouring himself some tea and accidentally spilled boiling water on his bare foot. He jumped instinctively, but then realized it didn’t hurt. He poured some more on his foot ... and with horror, discovered that he had contracted the disease himself. It is this loss of sensation that causes minor injuries (little scratches and slivers) to go unnoticed and untreated, which leads to infection and the eventual loss of fingers and toes.

Over time, the affected areas begin to lose blood circulation. There will be oozing sores that don’t heal; and often times fluid filled tumors will appear, ranging in size from that of a pea to a walnut. These tumors often appear in clusters – especially on the face around the mouth, ears, and eyes. As blood circulation continues to decrease, eventually it’s cut off completely, and from the outside-in the flesh begins to die. But leprosy is not a fatal disease in and of itself, and its progress is fairly slow; so what happens is that the victim is trapped within a body which is literally rotting away. It’s an ugly, living death that can last for many years as the victim becomes increasingly disfigured, until at last some other disease or complication ends it through death.

I tell you these things not to ruin your Thanksgiving dinner; but to help you understand what the ten lepers in the Gospel story were experiencing, and the grim future to which they were looking forward. The good news is that today we can treat and arrest the progress of leprosy when someone contracts it. But still, there are leper colonies in the United States and other places. The people who live in them are being treated. They're not getting any worse, nor are they contagious; but for the most part they remain where they are because they are so horribly disfigured that they prefer to stay out of sight of the world.

But effective treatment has only been available for the past few decades. The ten men in our story had no such hope. And the physical effects the disease had on their bodies was only a small part of the misery they endured. And to help you understand, I want you to imagine yourself as one of them. But let's back up a bit, to your life before. Let's say you have a family, a good job, nice home, lots of friends. Everything is going great. Then one day you notice a red spot about the size of a dime someplace on your skin. You don't think anything of it. Bug bite or something. But a week later it's still there. Hasn't changed a bit. By now, maybe someone else has noticed it. Yet another week, and now you're getting worried. The neighbors are beginning to talk. You notice they are keeping their distance. Finally your spouse or good friend (who also has been kind of guarded around you) says, "Maybe you should have that checked out."

So, in accordance with the Law of Moses, you march yourself over to the nearest priest. "Say, can we talk? Privately? It's a little silly, I suppose, but I've got this rash I'd like you to check out." He asks you a few questions. How long have you had it? Does it itch? No? He takes one look and leaps back. He's seen it before. And now your life is changed forever. You are not allowed to return to your home. The people you know and love will never see your face again. Instead you must wait outside town, while the priest tells your family to get some of your clothes together and dump them outside of town where you can get them. From a distance, you watch them carrying out your clothes and maybe a blanket on poles so they don't have to touch them. And from here on out you must wrap your body in such a way that there is not any exposed skin. You are required to keep a veil over your face. You may never again go to any inhabited place or approach any healthy person. And if someone is headed your way and coming too close, you must cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" to warn them not to get any nearer.

Well, you're familiar with the desolate place the lepers in your area stay, so you go there and join the others. There, for the first time, you get a good look at the fate that awaits you. The rules about covering up don't apply here. So the decomposing faces of your new neighbors are like a mirror of your future. You live on the food and gifts brought by your family to a known drop off point – or brought by the families of your new friends – it's share and share alike here. Leprosy is a great leveler. Makes no difference what or who you were: the richest, best educated, and most respected person in the community or just a lowly Samaritan. Here you are just another leper. And all you can do is wait in utter hopelessness for the advance of the disease which you see in various stages all around you, because no one ever recovers from it.

This was the pitiful existence and living death of the ten leprous men who called out to Jesus for mercy. And in accordance with the law of Moses, Jesus directed them to show themselves to the priests. Only a priest could proclaim a person to be clean. And that's really kind of strange. There is in the book of Leviticus an entire chapter about how to recognize if someone's leprosy is healed, and what kind of thank offerings are to be given by the one

who's become clean. I imagine that when studying for their qualification exams, the student priests must have thought it was pretty useless information. After all, no one with leprosy ever got better. Priests diagnosed leprosy all the time; but no one ever heard of a priest having to declare a former leper clean. It would seem to be chapter of meaningless ordinances. I can see these nine former lepers showing up at the temple, and all the priests scratching their heads and scrambling for the books to figure out what to do next.

But one of the lepers, when he realized that he was healed, turned back. And for this man to suddenly realize that he had been cleansed, I think took more than just having the advance of the disease arrested. The idea here is that he was restored. Fingers appeared where there were none. Flesh and skin long since rotted away was replaced with healthy tissue. Unlike today's cured lepers, he was ready to return to his family and home. He had been given his life back. His heart bursting with gratitude to God, he threw himself at Jesus' feet and praised him. And interestingly enough, he was the one person who understood and actually did what Jesus told him to do.

The priests of the Law of Moses could tell you when you were sick, and they had the never-used instructions to tell you what to do when you were well; but they powerless to help you. But Jesus is the great High Priest. Not only does he diagnose, but he heals and restores. Why take your offerings of thanks and praise to a priest who cannot help you, when you can take it to the One Priest who can and did? That's what this Samaritan did. And I think that all of us can understand and appreciate just how grateful he was to Jesus for all he done for him.

What I want *you* to see this Thanksgiving Day is that Jesus has done a far greater miracle for you. That's because inside each of us is an unclean soul. The disease of leprosy is but a faint picture of the pestilence of sin within us. We get it from our parents and we pass it on to our children. Sometimes we don't see its symptoms – but the disease is always there working death in us. We try the best we can to keep it covered up, we don't want anyone to see how rotten and disfigured that soul really is; but periodically we suffer outbreaks of ugliness that just can't be hidden. The disease numbs the heart so that we cannot feel; it rots the mind so that we think only evil thoughts. It drives us away from one another so that we cannot have true, open fellowship with others; even – perhaps, most of all – with the people we love the most. But we've all got it; it's the one great leveler. And throughout our lives we watch the progression of this terrible sickness taking its toll on ourselves and those around us, knowing that it must inevitably end in death.

But Jesus does not leave us there. As he came and passed through the regions of Galilee and Samaria where the outcast lepers were forced to live, today Jesus enters your life. And once again, standing far off, you've called out to him for mercy – and he's directed you to go, show yourself to the Priest. And in your going, his mighty Word has healed you. You see, unlike the priest of the law who could only see the disease, recoil in horror, and drive you away; Jesus, the Priest of the Gospel, reaches out to you and embraces your disease. He takes the symptoms on himself: your pain, your spiritual decay, your death, and your isolation all become his. He bears these for you on his cross. And he fills you with living faith in his suffering, death, and resurrection for you. And that faith cleanses the unclean soul within you. You're restored and given a new life. And so, here you are: presenting your offerings of thanks and praise to him: the Priest who healed you.

The story of this formerly leprous Samaritan is your story. It's my story. Today we've joined him at the feet of Jesus to give thanks. It's something that happens not just today, but everyday of your life. Each time we call out for his mercy confessing our sins, he heals us again from our unclean souls. And so it's appropriate on this day of Thanksgiving, that as we count our many blessings, we top the list with the most important blessing of all: the gift of life and salvation in Christ Jesus – and give thanks to him for it. All other gifts pale in comparison – which is why Paul can say that he knows the secret of being content whether his list of blessings is long or short. At all times, he has the one blessing that really matters.

May God give to each one grateful hearts for all that he's done and continues to do for us – and may he always direct us, whenever and as often as the leprosy of sin breaks out, to go and show ourselves to *the* Priest who alone can cure us: the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!