

This Sunday's Sermon

DOES JESUS WANT OBEDIENCE OR THANKS? – LUKE 17:11-19

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Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. 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!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. 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. 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?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

✠ An Account From the Perspective of John ✠

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Man, what an interesting day! Have you ever had one of those days where you were like "wow! What just happened?" I remember one day I spent with Jesus. Like many days with Jesus, it got you to stop and think, it changed your whole perspective on life, on God. It was one of those days that didn't make a whole lot of sense, because Jesus told a bunch of lepers to do one thing, but then he praised one of them for disobeying him. It seemed like Jesus was asking one thing and expecting another. Maybe you can think of a time where that has happened in your life.

I have to say, I was talking with Peter when all of this was happening, and I said to him, "Hey Peter, why do you suppose Jesus is so upset at the other nine lepers? I mean, they were only doing what he told them to do, 'go show yourselves to the priests.'" Peter thought a little bit differently, he couldn't believe how unthankful the other nine were. In fact, Peter was a little embarrassed that the only guy who came back to give thanks was a Samaritan, that unorthodox, mixed race people who didn't love God as much as the Jews did. Peter had to rethink his view of Samaritans. And really, Jesus didn't show disdain for them, but that's a whole other story. So here, Peter and I are at a crossroads, what was Jesus thinking, what did Jesus want from the lepers, and really what does he want from us? DOES JESUS WANT OBEDIENCE OR THANKS?

(1)

As you heard in the gospel reading, we the disciples were travelling with Jesus, making our way towards Jerusalem. Jesus had been preaching now for over two years, and he had begun making comments about his glorious victory celebration happening in Jerusalem in not too long a time, but he seems so cryptic with what it is all about. On this day we found ourselves traversing close to the border of Galilee and Samaria – home of the Samaritans. As we were approaching the village we would spend the night at, a group of lepers approached. They knew their place about a stone's throw away. Leprosy was one of those ailments that was a painful skin disease and also very contagious. Our lepers would

have to be separated from the rest of society because of the contagiousness of the disease. There was no known cure.

I don't remember seeing these particular people before, but when you're spending time with Jesus there are a lot of faces you meet. They cried out to us from a distance, "**Jesus, Master, have pity on us.**" I can try and put myself in their sandals, I probably would have done the same thing, ask for mercy from the one who has given mercy to so many. And what is truly amazing about Jesus' miracles, he always seems to do them in a different way. For some he touches and they are healed, for others he merely says the words, for still others he gives instructions. Jesus did not get any closer to these men, but he did give them instructions, "**Go show yourselves to the priests.**"

Jesus, ever aware of the laws of Moses and the prophets, gave instructions that lined up with those laws. Moses wrote that if anyone had a contagious skin disease which was healed, he had to show himself to the priest to verify his cleanliness, only then could the diseased person go back and live with his or her family. One thing was obvious, like his first miracle of changing water into wine, this miracle was not instantaneous, the lepers were still lepers when they left our sight. And yet they seemed to be willing to try anything, and if Jesus told them to see the priests, that's what they would do.

They obediently followed Jesus' instructions. From what happened next, we knew that somewhere along the way to the priests, those ten lepers were healed. Nine of them continued to follow Jesus' instructions obediently. I don't think you or I should have a problem with that. Because, after all, DOESN'T JESUS WANT OBEDIENCE? This is just one example of many where Jesus gives instructions. All throughout his ministry, Jesus told people he didn't come to abolish the law of Moses, and he encouraged us to live according to it.

How would you respond to the obedience of these nine lepers – they did what Jesus told them to do? While maybe there's a little rebellious nature inside of us, I also think there's a little person inside of every one of us that feels good when we've been obedient. In school, you're relieved when you have completed all of your assignments. In work being obedient to your boss and company policy. Even in church, we get a little sense of pride that we're even here, that we are helping the church out. Our obedience is not unlike the obedience of the 10 lepers. Jesus told them to show themselves to the priests. Jesus tells us to be obedient to him and the words he speaks, which are found in the Bible. But Jesus DOESN'T WANT OUR OBEDIENCE. Obedience is not what is praised in this story.

(2)

This is where Peter's comments about the unthankful nine come in. The only way we realized that the lepers were in fact healed was because one of them returned to us praising Jesus. We were just getting ready to recline down at the dinner table when we heard him a long ways off. As soon as he found where we were camped out, he rushed up to Jesus, got down on his hands and knees and started kissing Jesus' feet and thanking him.

He told us his story. He was on the way to the synagogue, just like Jesus said to go and find the priests. But while he was making his way there with the others, he realized he was healed, he no longer had the itchy skin. It seemed only natural for him to stop where he was at, turn around, and head back to Jesus to thank him. The verification from the priest could wait, he wanted to thank the one who made

him whole. Again, what was most surprising was that he was a Samaritan. I don't know if there's a group of people that you don't like very much, but the Samaritans were that for the Jews.

But we saw this Samaritan in a whole new light. Jesus even commended him, and put down the others, **"Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?"** From Jesus' words we knew that he healed all ten of them, not just the one who had come back. But how disappointed he was in the other nine. From these words it almost sounds like Jesus wants more people to give him thanks. And Jesus certainly deserves all the thanks in the world from all of us.

You see, Jesus is more than just a miracle worker, he is more than just a healer, he is the Messiah, the one promised from the beginning of the world to save a world lost in sin. Many people were coming to realize this fact, and I have a feeling his trip to Jerusalem will be the shining jewel in his crown. Because of this we owe him our thanks and praise, just like the leper who returned to give him praise. But as strange as it is to say this, Jesus DOESN'T WANT OUR THANKS either. He doesn't need our thanks.

(3)

This sounds completely contrary to everything that is written in the Bible. You may be thinking, doesn't Jesus say to be obedient, to follow God? Doesn't Jesus want us to thank him? And to tell you the truth, it sounded strange to me too, until you hear these words of Jesus, **"Rise and go; your faith has made you well."** Think about it. The lepers were obedient to Jesus' command to show themselves to the priests. But they were not healed because they showed obedience. The one Samaritan leper returned to give thanks, but it was not returning to give thanks that healed this man. So what was it? Jesus healed these men, the power that Jesus possesses healed these men, nothing that these men did – obedience or thanks – healed them.

Sometimes we get this idea in our head that somehow we play a role in our being healed, in our getting to heaven. But that is plainly not true. Yes, Jesus said, **"Be perfect as I the Lord your God am perfect."** But no matter how hard we try, no matter how obedient we are, we are not perfect. Our imperfect, sporadic obedience does not get us to heaven. And neither does our thanks. Yes, we can be thankful for all that God has done, we can jump up and down and praise God at the top of our lungs, we can let our light shine in other people's lives, but even this doesn't save us. It doesn't save us because deep down inside no matter how much we deny it, sin is dwelling inside of us.

So what saves us? What heals us? Again, the answer is Jesus, the power of Jesus, the work of Jesus on this earth. And then, **"while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** It wasn't anything in the lepers that healed them, and it isn't anything in us that saves us. And how does Christ get to us? Through faith – a simple trust in God. No decisions for God, but God's decision for us. **"Before the creation of the world he predestined you to be adopted as sons."** He makes faith grow in your heart. Notice what Jesus said, **"your faith has made you well."** Not "your faith has healed you from your leprosy," but your faith has made you spiritually well. Faith doesn't have that power, but Jesus does. Jesus once said **"faith the size of a mustard seed"** can move mountains.

I think the other nine lepers get a bad rap in this story, as if somehow Jesus didn't love them as much as the one who returned. Jesus loves all people great and small, believers and unbelievers, those

with weak faith and those with strong faith. He wants all people to be saved. And the only way that is happening for this sinful world is through faith. The strong faith of a great leader like Moses has the same results as a simple faith of a fisherman like me. We are both believers, and we are both going to heaven.

But the thing about faith is, whether weak or strong it will either grow weaker or stronger. A faith will shrink without the proper nourishment – the Word of God, but a faith will become strong through that nourishment. A believer's life is one of constant nourishment, because everything in the world around us wants to tear down our faith, it wants to separate us from God's Word.

The story of the ten lepers is one that I will remember for the rest of my life. On the surface it seems so simple – Jesus displayed his amazing power over the disease of leprosy, Jesus wants us to thank and praise him. But it is more than that, it was an amazing lesson in faith. It is faith that Jesus wants from us. Faith to put our trust in him as our only Savior. And when we have that faith, everything else flows from it. We become obedient to God, and we rejoice in all he has done for us. It isn't that JESUS WANTS OBEDIENCE OR THANKS, but that HE GETS OBEDIENCE AND THANKS through faith in him as our Savior. Amen!