

ONE OUT OF TEN
Luke 17:11-19

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He was a misunderstood man, really. Cast aside by society, forced to live in seclusion on the outskirts of town. He was so different from the others that people were afraid of him. Which was all fine by him until all these other outcasts starting being sent to his land, fairytale creatures that we relocating to *his* swamp! I'm talking, of course, about... Shrek. You know? That big, green, fictional ogre. It was Shrek who, alongside his talking donkey companion, tried to explain that there's more to ogres than people realize.

Shrek: Ogres are like onions.

Donkey: They stink?

Shrek: Yes. No.

Donkey: Oh, they make you cry.

Shrek: No.

Donkey: Oh, you leave 'em out in the sun, they get all brown, start sproutin' little white hairs.

Shrek: No. Layers. Onions have layers. Ogres have layers. Onions have layers. You get it? We both have layers.

Donkey: Oh, you both have layers. Oh. You know, not everybody like onions.

What the fictional green ogre is trying to get across to the talking donkey is that there's a lot more to Ogres than people think. There's much more beyond the surface. They're a misunderstood creature, Shrek argues.

We all have layers, don't we? We're not one-sided; we're multifaceted. Our life has layers. Our society has layers. Our social circles, the way we talk, live, and interact with one another. None of it is as simple as it seems on the surface.

When we read of leprosy in the scriptures, we are immediately drawn to its physical effects. We know it as the disease that so heinously erodes the flesh, a disfiguring malfunction. One commentary points out that leprosy in the Bible can refer to as many as 72 conditions, none of which go away.¹

We're reminded as Jesus enters the region, that the physical maladies are only the beginning. Lepers, too, have layers, and to become a leper in the ancient world is to *lose your life one layer at a time*, and you usually lost them forever.

¹ David Garland, *Luke*, 238. (in reference to leprosy in Luke 5:12)

Jesus meets them travelling in-between

So, Luke tells us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, which is for Luke, to point out that he's on his way to Calvary. As Jesus winds his way to Jerusalem in this gospel story, we're told that he's in the region between Samaria and Galilee. He's in a literal no man's land: "a place between acceptance and rejection." Betwixt and between, as the expression goes, not fully one thing or the other.

Jesus seems to find himself in these kinds of places, gravitating toward these kinds of people quite often. Jesus travels in the in-between places, and is constantly encountering the in-between people. They don't fit socially, they have problems physically, they're often distraught emotionally, and some are even considered by most to be unfit spiritually. Luke, as he records these details for a map-less culture, doesn't add this detail so we can trace Jesus' route. But he may be reminding us how any follower of Jesus must pattern their life: Going to those kind of in-between places, living with and for these kinds of in-between people.

Story: Meeting a man who was in-between

It was just a couple weeks ago that a man walked into our office on a Friday, looking for someone to pray with, to listen, to meet with a pastor for some answers. It's not an unusual occurrence, but this one was unique. He was at the end of his rope. His addiction had him kicked out the house, cut off from his children, out of a job. He was in-between. Walking in from a week-long addiction binge, he said he woke up that morning and knew something had to change. He woke up and decided he had to come find someone. "Before I do anything else," he said, "I need to know what God says."

It's possible that it's just a literary device to get Jesus from one place to another, but I'm convinced there's more to it. Jesus' journey is not coincidence, happenstance. He could choose one route or the other, but we meet him here in a land where it's easy to forget who belongs and who doesn't, where the rules don't really apply, where people have been put in their place, whether they like it or not. That's where Jesus travels today, and I suspect if we were more faithful, it's the kind of place we would find ourselves every day.

Our world remains a constant invitation to choose a side, to live at one pole or the other, lump people together into categories of "who I'm with" and "who I'm against." In the same way, our social lives and circles invite us to encounter and accumulate in groups that are just like us. We're invited to continue dismissing some or avoiding some others. We don't have time for most people's problems, and if we do, we're not creative enough to address them.

I'm convinced that following Jesus means learning to walk in those in-between places, the places where I'll encounter truly broken people, the places where there's no denying that what once was whole is now broken. It might mean living in a new awareness for those around me, ordering my life less around what's best for me, and more around what's best for the new life that God is offering in this world.

But that's hard to do. The reality is that if I were Jesus, I wouldn't have healed these lepers. Would you? Not because I wouldn't want to. Who wouldn't wish them healed? I'd love for them to get healed! But if I'm honest, I would never have had the chance at this healing, because I never would've gotten close enough to hear them. Maybe not even to see them.

“Unclean, Unclean”

And I don't think I'm alone in that. As I read the Old Testament traditions regarding leprosy, nobody wanted any part of it. In fact, the Bible all but assures that people with leprosy would be out of sight – out of notice. Leviticus 13:45-46 states: *“one who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his lip and cry ‘unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.”*

It's not enough that they're experiencing the despair of extreme isolation. According to the law, lepers first were removed from family and community, condemned to a beggar's life. According to the laws of Leviticus, it's not just that lepers were assumed to be sinful, they were declared unclean. That's why they had to wear torn clothes to identify themselves to others, and were forced to live outside the community, on the outskirts of town. They lost the ability to worship God because, according to the rules of their faith, they were not allowed in the Temple. Well, they were, but in the northwest corner space set apart for them called “The Leper's Chamber Court,” shielded from all the other people. Finally, to be a leper in Jesus' day meant to lose one's dignity, because people assumed that this condition was not just a disease, but also God's judgment.

Layer by layer, they're skin comes off and layer by layer their lives are torn apart.

Being required to shout “Unclean, unclean,” was not only a warning of being contagious, it was a theological claim that one was cursed by God. “Lepers,” Taylor writes, “were shunned – because their disease was contagious, certainly, but it was more than that. It was their pain, their loneliness, their inexplicable fear no one wanted to catch, and so they were kept at a distance.”²

Can you imagine identifying people by the worst thing about them? They don't even get names in Luke's gospel, just a “Lepers.” The mark of their single most-undesirable attribute. Addict. Convict.

Calling out for healing

So, I suppose it's no surprise that we're told they kept their distance, as they raised their voices and cried out: “Unclean, Unclean!” Did each of them say it twice? Did the disciples and Jesus hear it 20 times? **“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”** Only Luke uses this title “Master.” They call out to him by name and claim him to be the commander of power, the authority to do something about their plight. Even in the middle of nowhere, word of Jesus has spread.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 108.

Now we know Jesus was not the first Jew to claim to be a Messiah, and I assume he was not the only person ever rumored to heal people. And if you've been around desperate people enough you know they're willing to try just about anything. I can't help but think that they've called out to a lot of people as beggars at the edge of town. I would think they'd ask for healing from everybody. That's what sick people do. They're calling out to everybody! But, unlike everyone else who just looks and moves on, Jesus sees them.

People in your life every day are in need of the life, the healing, the wholeness, Jesus offers. Do you know anyone who's raising his or her voice? Is there someone you know that's in need? These ten lepers had to be depending on whatever charity they could scrounge up. Loving like Jesus loves, means seeing like Jesus sees.

14: When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed.

He tells them to go and show themselves to the priest because the priest is the only person with the authority to examine them and deem them clean and healed. The priests had no ability to heal but they could inspect, give the required sin offerings, and restore the person back to society. So, each of them is told to turn and go to the priest as if they've already been healed. Imagine what that first step toward town must have felt like! And in the process of obeying Jesus they discover that it has, in fact, happened!

Can you imagine that experience? One guy licks his lips to feel them full again, another looks down to discover that his half-missing hand has every part again, and with it he pulls back his sleeves to examine the rest. Another hears their shock and realizes that the hearing in his damaged ear has returned. The sounds of life are back! Another feels his nose fully return and takes a whiff of the cool panhandle air... only to realize he wasn't missing much.

Jesus hasn't just healed ten sick people. He's restoring life to them layer by layer: the touch of family, the care of community, the worship of God, the dignity of work.

But we quickly learn that there's really two stories here. One is about ten lepers receiving healing. The other is about one receiving salvation.

¹⁵ Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan.

ONE is aware that Jesus' healing was only one layer of what he needed. New life from Jesus will affect every layer of life, and he wants it all. One out of the ten lepers returns to get more than surface healing. The least expected outsider wants more than something from God: he wants God in and with him, transforming every place sin and sickness have touched.

He knows, not only, that something miraculous has happened to him, but also that he's been given a gift. He's received the healing of Jesus on the surface, he's experienced restoration on the outside, but he wants more than that. He wants it deep down, to his bones, to his soul!

Out of deep gratitude for what he has received, he falls at Jesus' feet in thanksgiving. In the first story, 10 lepers come to Jesus, keep their distance, and cry for mercy. In the second story, 1 man comes to Jesus, falls at his feet, and praises God for receiving mercy.

And the most shocking detail of all, the one characteristic that no first century Jewish hearer could've gotten past, is that it was the Samaritan. The rest, most likely Judean Jews, are nowhere to be found. Samaritans were descendants of Assyrian captives who intermarried among the races, leaving some to consider them racial half-breeds. A Samaritan leper then was a double outcast, the absolute least likely to be depicted as a role model for faith.

But what good could a Jewish priest do him? He has his own religion and place of worship. And those nine leave him as fast as their disease had brought them together. He's been left by the nine, but with his response he's now in the company of shepherds and angels who praise Jesus at his birth in Luke's gospel. He won't need their priest. He's found the true high priest, and he's fulfilling the law at the feet of Jesus.

17 Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they?" 18 [b] Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" 19 And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith [c] has made you well."

Jesus' response is one of the more curious parts of this passage. After all, the nine hadn't done anything wrong. In fact, they've done just what he told them. In his little book, *The Way of the Wolf*, Martin Bell asks, "Where are the nine?" Just imagine, he says. You've been cured of a disease that segregates you. A dreaded skin disease separated the contaminated from the healthy. Suddenly the disease is gone. So what do you do? Where do you go?

- One leper was a mother. She ran back to hug one of her children.
- Another was a literalist. If the Bible said "go see the priest," he went right to his priest.
- Another was offended. He expected he had to do something to earn the healing, and Jesus healed him before he could earn it. He was offended.
- Another was so happy that he forgot to go back and say thanks.

More than just the nine: where are the priests? I can't help but think that it's not every day that nine lepers walk in healed. Where are they? Why have none of them left what they were doing to discover more about Jesus? As it turns out, "Those most happy with the status quo are the least likely to express hope in the coming revolutionary work of God."³

We can ask about the priests, or the other nine, but the story focuses on one out of the ten.

³ Mark Baker and Joel Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 255.

All ten acted on faith and received a cleansing, but only this one out of the ten returns to hear Jesus say: "Your faith has saved you." *Sozo*: means to save, heal, deliver, restore, made well. His gratitude for the gift he has received has led to his own salvation. Of all ten, he is the only one who realizes that the one who has given them this gift is greater than the gift itself. That's why he's laying at his feet.

The other lepers have settled for the gifts of God, rather than the giver.

Many preachers have posed the pressing question: if you could have all the promises of heaven (beautiful scenery, no more disease, no more depression, friends and family), but Jesus wouldn't be there, would that be okay? Plenty of people love what Jesus has to offer, but too many have sought the gifts of God rather than the giver.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Grateful*, says that "Gratitude gives us a new story. It opens our eyes to see that every life is, in unique and dignified ways, graced; the lives of the poor, the castoffs, the sick, the jailed, the exiles, the abused, the forgotten as well as those in more comfortable physical circumstances. Gratitude calls us to sit together, to imagine the world as a table of hospitality. To feed one another. To feast, to dance in the streets. To know and celebrate abundance. Gratitude empowers us. It makes joy and love possible. It rearranges the way we see and experience what is all around us. Gratitude makes all things new. It transforms how we understand what is broken and gives us the ability to act more joyfully and with hope."

"Joy is the simplest form of gratitude." -Karl Barth

In this season of gratitude, surely there is more than thanking God for a serious amount of food, the things we own, a wonderful break, or even great family. The saving mercy of God has been freely given to us, that every layer of our lives and our world would be redeemed and renewed by him. Just as we receive healing from God, we're called in gratitude to join him among the sick and the needy, offering his new life to all who would put their faith in him.

What does gratuity look like? A survey found that the highest tips in the nation are 20.3 percent, up from 19.9 percent in 2014. On average, Americans tip 18.1 percent.

What should gratuity look like for a healing? Jesus gets one out of ten.

What does gratitude look like for a giver whose saving grace includes freely giving himself? Surely, it should look like our lives at his feet.

Let it look better today than 1 out of 10.