

# Thanksgiving Day

## THE MAKING OF THANKSGIVING

Luke 17:11-19

### Thanksgiving Day

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

11On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priest." And as they went, they were made clean. 15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

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## DIAGNOSIS: Deluded about the Law

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Community of Outcasts*

The ten lepers Jesus encounters are outcasts from their respective communities (Jews and Samaritans) because they are "unclean" (cf. v. 14), a verdict that has been rendered by their respective laws. Of course, you hear no arguments from the lepers. They know it. It is what the law prescribes. And they are compliant, as if they had any other choice, because they

keep their distance (v. 12). Also significant is that they are by no means alone in their outcast state. Even in their misery they love company. Significantly, their condition now overrules all other distinctions between them, including, Jew and Samaritan. They are simply identified as “unclean” outcasts.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Desperate**

Inwardly, these ten also share common misery. They are desperate, hopeless, and helpless. The only thing they can do is plead for “mercy” (v. 13). But note why they want mercy! They want it so they can go back into their respective communities, through the approval of the priests (cf. v. 14), and live by its law, its principle of excluding the “unclean.” Peculiar to this community is the way it selectively defines unclean, on hypocritical terms, in which the unclean are the other; a list of others that certainly could include the Samaritan, or the poor, or the undocumented, or the conservative, or the liberal—the list could be legion. The lepers are desperate to be on the other side of the charge of unclean; they would prefer to condemn rather than be condemned.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Dying under the Delusion of Living**

At least nine of the ten lepers in the story get their wish. They are delighted that they are cleansed of their leprosy (v. 14) and they are eager to comply with Jesus’ words, “Go and show yourselves to the priests” (v. 14). Those priests, they believe, are their ticket back into their old community. But that is their delusion. Would that their priests taught the law of God with the same forthrightness with which it was given, as interpreted by Jesus himself, for example, as a word of “woe” (11:42-52), not welcome, as an instrument of death not life. Instead, as Luke notes elsewhere, those priests “are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it” (11:44). The nine are running to a law that condemns them,

condemns them not because of their leprosy or lack of it, but because of their lack of love for neighbors, like the Samaritan, and their lack of love for God and his mercy, standing among them in Jesus (cf. 10:27).

## **PROGNOSIS: Thankful for Christ**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Jesus, Master of Mercy*

The Samaritan (precisely because he was a Samaritan and different from the other nine, who were Jews), recognized something different about Jesus. Jesus healed all ten equally, as though they were all “foreigners” (v. 18). That is, he healed them apart from what community they came from and apart from how they stood with regard to the law. The Samaritan came to see Jesus as God doing a new thing, extending mercy beyond measure, mercy apart from the law, mercy that knows no outcasts. Here is a mercy that is more than simply a matter of cleansing the flesh. Much more, it is a mercy that “makes us well” (cf. v. 19), one that saves us from the incrimination of God’s law, one that bridges the distance between holy God and unclean sinners. The Samaritan did not yet know what mastery Jesus demonstrated over sin, judgment, and death to speak those simple words of mercy authoritatively: “Your faith has made you well” (v. 19). But we do! He himself had to become the chief of outcasts, embody our death, and be laid in our grave. But he mastered them by bursting from the grave, rising to new life, and becoming the foundation of a brand new community of outcasts: outcasts reconciled to God.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *Thankful*

In the story, the Samaritan has a profound internal “turnaround” called thankfulness. Not only does he see that he is externally “cleansed” like the other nine, but he turns around, praises God, returns to Jesus and gives thanks (v. 15). Indeed, he falls

prostrate at Jesus' feet (v. 16), worshiping him as God. If Jesus weren't God, the Samaritan would be committing blasphemy. But because Jesus is God in the flesh giving mercy to sinners, this sinner is right in giving true thanks to God by offering true worship to Jesus. Jesus calls this unreserved, free response "faith" (v. 19). Faith in Jesus is the difference between this one (Samaritan) and the other nine, because faith connects him/us to the bridge, Jesus, that spans the distance between God and sinners. The law, and life under the law, in reality is the wall that separates God and sinners; Christ, and faith in him, is the bridge that connects them thankfully.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** : *Get up and Go on Your Way*

Right now it may appear that the Samaritan is all alone, but that's not really the case. He is part of a new community that is emerging in Christ. That community is revealed only as it comes together in the worship of Jesus, a worship marked as Eucharist, as thanksgiving. Apart from worship, the Christian community exists incognito, hidden and dispersed within the diverse mix of communities that make up the world (families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and the like), communities that are defined by "law." Christians are in these communities not because Christians are "saved" through them. Never! Rather, Christians are in them because these communities (and those in them) are in need of the very same kind of saving that they (Christians) have found in Jesus. Christians are there in the world not by accident, but because Christ sends them there, so that they may extend the offer of Christ's mercy there as well (cf. 19). The closing words of Jesus to the Samaritan are, therefore, a commission and a permission to extend his mercy to all. So "go on your way" in the name of Jesus. And whatever kind of outcasts you meet along the way, know that Jesus' mercy is for them, too.