

# Thanksgiving Day

**ALL TEN LEPERS GOT BETTER, ONE OF THEM EVEN GOT WELL**

**Luke 17:11-19**

**Thanksgiving Day**

**Analysis by Ron Starenko**

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 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? 18Was 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."

*Credits: The title of this analysis belonged to Bob Bertram, who intended to make it the theme of his major presentation at an Order of Philippi seminar in Florida before his death. Too sick to be present, he shared the title with me when the seminar was in the planning stages, indicating that he would be using material from classroom lectures. The director of the seminar, Richard Lyon, who had a life-long interest in healing, communicated a witness at the end of his life which I have included in the conclusion of this analysis.*

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## DIAGNOSIS: When Getting Better Can Get Worse

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Not Getting Better Seems Like the Worst***

Leprosy is no longer the dreaded disease it used to be. The younger generations among us might not even know what it is. In Jesus' day it was a hideously shameful thing, an incurable skin disease, disfiguring faces and limbs. Furthermore, lepers were ostracized from society, isolated in miserable colonies, making matters worse for them. Today we say, what could be worse than having the shame of cancer or mental illness? George Bernard Shaw, the English playwright, once said that the worst thing that can happen to us is not to get what we want, and the next worst thing is to get it. So, getting better might turn out to be not all that good. As long as we imagine that getting better is the highest good, whatever that might mean, we are already in bad shape. Already on the wrong track, we are a long way from getting well. And that leaves us all with a problem we didn't know we had.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Getting Better Poses a Greater Danger***

Getting better, then, very easily becomes for us the best there is. The time and energy and money we devote to getting better only serves to expose what we believe in our hearts about what is ultimate in life, the things of less importance, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called a preoccupation with the "penultimate." How easy it is for us, like those lepers perhaps, to believe that it's time we got a break, that we are entitled to a better life, as though we deserved it. As it turned out for the nine lepers, getting better didn't necessarily mean that their problems were over, and it certainly didn't mean that they would be grateful. Getting better might indeed be a step

backwards, another problem we didn't know we had.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** : *Getting Better Sets the Stage for Something Worse Still*

Even though all ten lepers got better, they all eventually got sick again and finally died. At best, getting better is but a temporary reprieve from what is unwanted, being vulnerable and, worse, mortal. Nine lepers checked in to make "a testimony" (5:14) before the priests (v. 14), who no doubt pooh-poohed their stories and simply signed them off as fit to re-enter society. When we move back into life by the old rules, the old values, the old goals, without the experience of undeserved divine mercy, our state is actually worse than ever. We might have managed to drive out some demons, but seven worse could enter our lives through the back door, leaving the state of our lives worse than in the first place (11:24-26). Never able to avoid death altogether, (a problem in itself), we are again left with a problem we didn't know we had. We haven't reckoned with God. Not cured of our leprous state before God, having only the empty promises of the Evil One and the idolatrous reinforcement of our culture, we pay the price for settling for something less than getting well: lapsing into a sickness and a death from which there is no cure.

## **PROGNOSIS: When Getting Well Is Getting Through the Worst**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Getting Well Comes at a Price*

If making us better, short or long-term in this life, was Jesus' crowning glory, he would be no more than a medicine man and ten lepers would have gotten better, never to be heard from again. That one of them got well becomes quite another story. Evidently Jesus was up to something more than just getting people better. His mission was to make us well (saved, made whole, having the

life of God), and that required something more than the reversal of an illness, a transformation that required the cross, no less. Jesus needed to become our Divine-Human Savior, nothing less. Healing the leprosy of the ten, not the least of their or our blessings, still undeserved and still worthy of our thanksgiving, is not yet the well-ness that Jesus offers. Leprosy is a metaphor for our alienation from God, the ugliness of our condition before God. To heal that required a price that only God could pay. When the lepers approached Jesus for healing, he was "on the way to Jerusalem." He was cross-bound, knowing what it would take to make us well, to restore us to God, to get us on the way to new life. In other words, it was necessary (9:22; 18:31-33; 24:6-9; 26:46-47) for him to become the worst leper of all, the disfigured, alienated, abandoned one, whose sole purpose in life was to suffer away the worst, our deserved death. Taking the worst, our sin, he exchanged it with his best, the whole (holy) life he shared with his Father from eternity. Pleased with that, his Father and the Spirit raised Jesus from death, whole, beyond corruption, the first specimen of the new creation. He got through the worst to make possible the best there could be, bringing us along with him.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Getting Well Involves Turning to the Savior***

Nine of the lepers, for whatever their reasons or motives, returned to life under the law, doing whatever the priests prescribed, content with getting better, moving on a direction away from faith, on the path to death. The Samaritan, the foreigner, turned away from death by returning to Jesus, from whom he experienced the mercy of God, the highest good of all. He prostrates himself before Jesus and gives thanks to God, something he could do only because the Spirit of God was upon him. In humble faith he sees God and knows God in the face of Jesus. And Jesus says to him, "Your faith has made you well" (v.

19). The leper got something more than getting better. He got well, said Jesus, which is to be, as Luther put it, “as alive and as true and as free as Jesus.” And, in getting well that leper had gotten through the worst there is, from death to life. To have Jesus is to have everything he is.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Getting Well, We Get Going***

Jesus told the foreigner, his former condition altered forever, to “get up and go your way” (v. 19), for now he had by his faith a life he didn’t have before, an “alien righteousness,” as Luther called it, Jesus’ own abiding eternal life. Richard Lyon wrote: “Friends, Colleagues, and whomever...I have an ‘alien’ cancer...The outlook is soon terminal for this life. The good news is that I have become more healed than I ever thought could happen to me. (To be ‘healed’ comes from the same word root as to be ‘made whole’ – not to be confused with ‘cured.’)...At home for Christmas...what was abundantly given was a lot of love. We had Holy Communion...And so now, folks, what your prayers might focus on is that at the final moment Our Lord will perfect my healing so that I will be presented to the one who is the most whole – Holy – as one of his children. Right now I feel safe. Thanks be to Christ.” What a way to go! Like the foreigner who got well in the saving power of Jesus by getting through the worst, Richard pressed on “to attain the resurrection of the dead” (Phil. 3:11), as we all get to do, to live in the New Covenant, made well, no longer worshipping health and comfort, no longer needing to run from sickness and death, because we go on our way through the worst, at all times in the company of Jesus, reflecting the mercy of God we have seen in the face of Jesus, turning from ourselves to our neighbor, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, living out our wellness in a way we would have never known, were it not for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.