

# Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

## CHRIST FOR LEPERS—LEPERS FOR CHRIST

Luke 17:11-19

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by James Squire

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 priests." 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."

*NOTES: In JESUS and the New Age, Fred Danker provides a number of very helpful observations:*

- *"Luke's introduction of the motif of the journey (kai egeneto en to poreuesthai) in 17:11 indicates that he views the story of the lepers as an important illustration of basic misunderstanding in Israel. At 17:5 the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. The present story*

reveals that faith properly conceived is faith in Jesus.... The Samaritan who returned in gratitude contrasts with the nine Jews who accepted the messianic benefit as something owed them by God."

- "... But nine of the lepers failed to understand the meaning of mercy and that God's most eloquent expression of it takes place in Jesus. Hence they are not criticized for failing to give thanks to Jesus but for failing to return and give God the glory, that is, the credit for disclosing the divine identity in and through Jesus, their Messiah."
- "... Thus these words, 'Your faith has made you well' do not say that exertion of faith spells healing but that the one to whom the faith is directed has spelled the difference for this man. Faith without an agent who can respond to the faith is only a psychological phenomenon."
- Danker also indicates that there is a message in this story for Greek-thinkers like most of us: "Luke's triple reference (vv. 15, 16, 18) to the benefit conferred, with emphasis on the appropriate response of gratitude, unmistakably interprets Jesus as a benefactor. Luke's story therefore qualifies as ... a recital about a person or deity whose performance is exceptional. The ingratitude of the nine is all the more blameworthy in the face of such beneficence. One of Menander's characters epitomized this aspect of human frailty (sic) (Fragments 595):

*'Tis ever true; once saved, we show no gratitude.*

*Once pity has been granted us, the thanks we swore*

*Would be undying, with our needs end itself lies dead."*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Jumping Hurdles with Jesus as Our Horse**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *"Just this once..."***

Ten were outcast because they were unclean. They were restricted in their proximity to other people—under a restraining order, if you will. They were in dire need of mercy. Nine of them received that mercy without giving thanks; they received it not as mercy, but as restitution. Even if we get ourselves into trouble, we have been trained by sin to look for mercy as a quick fix, sort of like a junkie that denies he is a junkie: "Just a little fix to get me over this bump. That's all!" Either way, we assume there will always be a mercy fix there for us if we need it.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *"... and I'll never bother you again!"***

We may heave a sigh of relief when mercy does appear, but like the nine, there's no way we respond in gratitude. Menander's verse (quoted by Danker above) is strikingly true about us in the 21st century. Our moral equivalent is, "No good deed ever goes unpunished." With our immediate crisis "solved," all we want is to put it behind us and regain our rightful peer and community status. Well, we do put it behind us (as we walk down the road to the priest and away from Jesus), but our problem is not solved. In fact, our problem gets worse. We have no gratitude for our benefactor; the one who shows us mercy gets no appreciation for it. We don't trust him; we use him and trust ourselves to never need him again.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *"Why does life have to be so cruel?"***

Funny thing, though: our need for mercy never ends. It always returns. We fail ourselves, and the one who alone is worthy of our trust lies behind us, in our wake. Our lack of gratitude backfires on us. Like the rich man in Luke 16, we view Jesus as a servant to our needs. Like the rich man, we are bound to find

out that Jesus will not function that way forever. But like the rich man, we continue on down the road, oblivious to our peril. The worst kind of “lost” is when we are lost and don’t realize it. Will it be too late when we do?

## **PROGNOSIS: Basking in the Glory of the Great Benefactor**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *“Here, would you like some company?”*

That’s the tantalizing question the Gospel faces—in fact, it is the very question raised by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus: Will Jesus’ resurrection be enough to inspire faith? “Your faith has made you well,” says Jesus. As Danker points out, it is the target of that faith—Jesus himself—that makes the difference in us. He makes that difference by becoming as lost as we are: He himself needed mercy, crying out to his Father in heaven for it. He himself became a leper and worse: despised as unclean, cast out beyond the city gates, and subjected to a criminal’s secular execution. And yet, he too was proceeding on his chosen path. He too left behind him all sorts of offered salvation—from the chief priests, from Herod, from Pilate, from the soldiers, and from the spectators—and rejected them. That is how he joins with us. But then comes the surprising twist: he is in it for our salvation, not his own. His faith killed him—to make us well. He is the great benefactor that outshines all other benefactors. The benefit he offers us is his Life, in exchange for our death.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *“You are not a bother to me!”*

“Was none of them found to return...?” Luke makes it clear that Jesus considers the nine who didn’t return in gratitude lost to him. But what he proceeds toward Jerusalem to accomplish, is as much for them as it is for the tenth leper. It is for us as

well. Will it be too late? Not for lack of persistence and forbearance on Jesus' part. He comes to us not as the stern taskmaster (we have such folk in our lives already), but as benefactor, hoping to make a difference for us. When we are driven to seek mercy, he will be there, ready to give it and hoping to reorient our faith. It is ultimately our choice, but it is he who reaches out to us, hoping to capture us in his loving arms. His haunting question in verse 18, "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?," still hangs out there for us to marvel at, unanswered. It is a question that has haunted Christians for about 2000 years, and it will continue to do so. But Jesus is not afraid to ask the question, and is not afraid to press on in the face of that question. He is not daunted in his efforts to create that saving faith within us.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** : *"Help me find more just-this-ones!"*

In fact, Jesus is so relentless in his efforts that he has enlisted a global task force—"Leper Greeters" you might call them—to walk the dusty roads of this life on the outskirts of well-kept society, be they inner-city alleys or suburban subdivisions or anywhere in between. Former lepers like you and I are now the ones answering the calls for mercy. We are the presence of the Great Benefactor everywhere we go in our world today. We are dismayed not because gratitude for us is in such short supply, but that gratitude for God is in such short supply. But like Jesus, those who seem the least impacted by God's mercy are precisely the lost ones we are called to go out and find. On behalf of the one who went to such great lengths to redeem us, we are empowered to go to great lengths for those who seem the hardest to reach. It takes a stubborn one to know a stubborn one.