

ONE TURNED BACK

Luke 17:11-19

Luke records the beginning of Jesus' ministry in this way: One Sabbath day, he came to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and stood up to read from the scroll of Isaiah these words –

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor,
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed.

The gospel of Luke has been called 'the gospel of the underdog.'¹ This Gentile doctor is careful to highlight encounters Jesus had with people we do not meet in the other gospels, like the shepherds at Jesus' birth, the sinful woman whose tears drench Jesus' feet, and the dying thief on the cross – encounters with foreigners, with the poor, with outcasts of society, and with the incredibly sinful.

Our passage today is just such an underdog story: Ten lepers cry to Jesus for mercy, Jesus heals all ten, but only one turns back to give thanks and offer praise to God. This mirrors a central message of Luke – **the gospel message goes out to all, few receive it with gratitude and faith, and the ones who do are often those we would least expect.**

As our story unfolds, ask yourself the question: "Would I expect the one who turns back?"

But first, let's meet all ten lepers, and let's find out what they have in common:

I. TEN RECEIVED MERCY (vv. 11-14)

A. Common Bond (v. 12) – picture it – 10 lepers banded together – WHY? Because they have a...

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 5.

B. Common Need – they are lepers – dangerous skin disease

But it's more than physical need:

1. Social Need – (v. 12) they “stood at a distance” and likely much more than 6 ft. (one source says at least 50 yards)²
[Lev. 14 – “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes...and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’...He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” – you get the sense of utter isolation – cut off from society.]
2. Spiritual Need – As long as they had the disease, they were considered ‘unclean’ and could not access the temple

Quarantining and not being able to go to church was life for them – 2020 around 20 AD

C. Common Knowledge – must have heard of Jesus before because when he was coming by they knew he might be able to help them³

D. Common Cry – “MERCY!”

- not first time – “Jesus, have mercy on me!” in Luke and others
- “Master” – Luke prefers this term instead of ‘rabbi’ or others⁴
- Hear the emotion behind their words – they are *desperate*
- “God, do for me what I could never do for myself”

E. Common Obedience (v. 14)

- Jesus’ command - “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”
- [Lev 14 – lepers whose leprosy was healed could show themselves to the priests in order to be declared clean and be restored to life as normal – here, though, Jesus says to show themselves to the priests *before* they are healed]
- surprisingly, they all obey – “it’s worth a try”

F. All Ten Receive Mercy (v. 14b)

- “As they went, they were cleansed”
- common experience of God’s mercy

G. Common Gratitude

- wait, that’s not what happens

² Barclay, p. 218.

³ William Hendriksen, *Luke*, p. 798.

⁴ Zerwick, p. 251.

- Ten received mercy, but only one turned back
- And so we enter the both unsettling and beautiful second section of our passage in vv. 15-19

II. ONE TURNED BACK (vv. 15-19)

A. Why Did He Go Back? (vv. 15-16)

- (15) “Then one of them, *when he saw that he was healed*, turned back” – he went back when he saw that he was healed; at that moment, his heart overflowed with praise
- Why? Because he knew he didn’t heal himself – it had to be God’s power flowing through the man Jesus he had cried to
- So what did he do? - “prais[ed] God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.”
- Clear that he was moved at a heart level – praise and gratitude burst from the depths of his being

(Now that we know why he went back, that brings up another question: Who was this man?)

B. Who was This Man?

1. (16b) “Now he was a Samaritan.”
 - Seems simple enough, but wait – in Grk, “he” is emphasized.⁵ This is no side note – the fact that a Samaritan is the only one who returned to give praise to God is shocking for two reasons:
 - a. Samaritan and Jewish relations – they were enemies, they should despise each other – something big must have happened in this Samaritan’s heart for him to thank a Jewish healer.⁶
 - b. Only spiritually-aware one is a seeming outsider to the covenant promises – you might expect a Jew to return, but a Samaritan?!⁷

And what about the other nine? Where are they? Jesus asks the same thing in vv. 16-18:

⁵ Hendriksen, p. 798.

⁶ Ibid., p. 798.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, p. 1403-4.

His three questions reveal both a chilling tragedy and a beautiful scandal.

We see the **tragedy** right away:

- First – “Were not ten cleansed?” (implied answer, ‘yes’)
- Second and third go with it – “Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Where *are* the nine? This is the tragedy. These nine lepers knew of Jesus, they met him in the flesh, they even experienced his grace and mercy in a miraculous healing, and yet they seem to have missed him completely.

Jesus’ emphasis that the man who returned is a Samaritan and a “foreigner” makes it likely that the other nine were Jews⁸ -- the ones who were “blessed far above any other nation.”⁹ The ones who grew up learning of God and observing the Sabbath. These nine miss God when he is standing before them in flesh.

[There is a warning here for us. Is it possible for us to experience God’s grace and mercy and yet miss him completely? As one commentator said, “exposure to God’s grace is not good enough; one must receive it.”]

In this encounter, the ones you would expect to return with gratitude do not, and the one you would least expect – he is the one who returns.

And this is the **beautiful scandal**.

Jesus calls the Samaritan a “foreigner” – this term literally means “of another race or people group.”¹⁰

It “appeared on signs prohibiting non-Jews from passing the inner barrier of the temple.”¹¹ – As if to say, “Don’t come any closer!”

And yet this “foreigner” is the only one who comes close to Jesus – close enough to fall at his feet.

The tragedy of the nine who do not return and the scandal of the unlikely one who does illustrates what Luke is getting at all along in his gospel.

⁸ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, p. 166.

⁹ Bock

¹⁰ Zerwick, p. 251; Danker, p. 17.

¹¹ Bock, p. 1404-5.

That the good news of Jesus goes out to all, with two results:

- 1) Most, as shown by the nine, will not respond with gratitude and acceptance, but
- 2) There will be some who respond with heartfelt gratitude and faith, and it's often not the ones we would expect.

It's the dirty band of shepherds who heard the angelic choir and ran to see a baby in a manger.

It's the sinful woman who wept tears of gratitude over Jesus' feet and wiped the dirt away with her hair.

It's the prodigal son who lost everything and who the father runs to and welcomes home with a lavish party.

It's the short tax collector who climbs a tree to see Jesus, and whom Jesus calls down and stays the night at his house.

It's the thief on the cross who asked Jesus to remember him when he comes in his kingdom. And Jesus does.

It's the kind of person your neck bristles at when you think about them – the kind of people you judge most.

In this culture of division, it's the kind of people you're the most quick to cancel.

It's the woman who struggles with doubts.

It's the man with mental or emotional health issues.

It's the nine-year-old skinny red-headed boy who grew up in church and a Christian school and had every opportunity to grow cold to the gospel, but by God's grace didn't, and now stands before you preaching.

It's the ones we would least expect.

Who is this man who turned back?

This man is all who have experienced God's mercy and responded in faith and thanksgiving. By God's grace, this man is me. This man is you who have received God's mercy. **We are all the ones we'd least expect.**

And so that leaves us with one question: Who was healed? Who was made well that day?

- The ten lepers? In a way, yes. They walked away and their leprosy was gone.
- But what about the one who came back?

Jesus' words in verse 19 are reserved only for him: "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

That phrase "made well" is a verb that means "saved" or "rescued."¹² It can describe physical or spiritual healing, and in this case, it describes both.

His faith saved him. Where do we see his faith? In his response to being healed. This man's response of gratitude and praise revealed that he saw his healing as coming from God. He received it as God's mercy on him, through this Jewish healer, Jesus.

Something we're not told – did he ever make it to the priest? You see, the law stated that after presenting yourself to the priest, you would offer sacrifices before being fully welcomed back in to the worshiping community. Perhaps he did make it to the priest and present these offerings.

But we know one thing. Jesus, as it says in v. 11 was "on the way to Jerusalem." He's on his way to become a sacrifice for the even more dangerous leprosy of the heart – sin. This man's faith is evidence that Jesus has made him well physically and spiritually. He is a new creation.

He went from a physical, social, and spiritual outcast to becoming an insider to the covenant promises by faith.

What about you? Have you experienced God's mercy but never responded in heartfelt gratitude and praise? This morning, I invite you to come fall at Jesus feet, giving him thanks.

Have you responded in faith, but your heart of gratitude has grown cold? Come again.

Ten received mercy. One turned back.

Brothers and sisters, rise and go your way; by the grace of God in Christ, your faith has made you well.

¹² Danker