



The Gospel of Luke 17:11-19

May 21, 2023 • Luke Knight

Last Sunday was Mother's Day, so maybe there were flowers, cards, gifts. We do our best to appreciate the mums around us. But, and I really don't mean to sound glass-half-full here, I sometimes wonder if the appreciation fades as faster than the flowers. What I mean is the Monday after Mother's Day comes quickly. It's also possible a few mums are listening even now and thinking, "Mother's Day? I hadn't really noticed. Seemed like business as usual to me!" Gratitude doesn't always come naturally, and when it does, it may not hang around long. We're forgetful creatures, often taking one another for granted. But we're given new opportunities to say thanks to each other every day, maybe even to mothers still. Imagine that - a thank you, and not even on Mother's Day!

The story from Luke's gospel today is another example of Jesus' action and of people's various responses to that action. And it's a story about gratitude. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is instructing his disciples on how they should live, his previous teaching being on humility. We hear that following Jesus and working in his kingdom will mean his disciples are marked by deep humility, resulting in an attitude of service to God. The rest of the New Testament follows Jesus' lead. Given all we know about Jesus, both by his example and teaching, if someone claiming to be Christian *isn't marked by humility and service*, they've got some growing up to do in faith. Because the words *humility*, *service* and *Jesus* are synonymous. The words *Christian*, *humility and service* many times are not synonymous. It's up to those of us following Jesus today to change that.

Luke then tells us that Jesus was traveling along the Galilean and Samaritan border, and encounters a leper colony (a border being an unsurprising place to find a group of outcasts, just as today in many parts of the world). Leprosy is a term used throughout the Bible for dangerous skin conditions. People with leprosy were banned from regular life, often out of necessity forced to find community support with others sharing a similar affliction. If you had leprosy and needed to get around town, you were required announce yourself as "unclean" everywhere you went. A pretty horrid existence - not only are you gravely ill, but you're also required to literally

repel human connection. All illness is isolating, but in this way leprosy was especially nasty. As the story goes, this group shouted at Jesus from a way off since they knew to keep their distance, but they'd heard enough about Jesus' reputation of healing to take their chances. They seemed to be group made up of both Jewish and Samaritan people, historically two ethnic groups who shared a good deal of animosity toward each other, so you can imagine their desperation if it took a disease to bring them together. They were, as they shouted out to Jesus, to be pitied. But Jesus hears them, Jesus sees them, and with a few words Jesus heals them, telling them to go show themselves to the local priests for proof of cleansing. If these ten people had really been healed, they'd need to be given a clean bill of health by a local authority in order to reintegrate back into society. And they were all healed, with just a few words at a distance from Jesus.

We should never miss the forest for the trees in the gospels. Jesus has just made dead people walking alive again. All their suffering, shame, loneliness, alleviated in instant. This is the power of Jesus among us, of the kingdom's arrival. As we hear at the end of the episode, they had in a very real way been raised to life – in many ways a picture for us all. These folks didn't get advice from Jesus, but emancipation, resurrection, and there was only Jesus to thank. Except there wasn't much thanks given. Only one of ten returns to find Jesus and throw himself at Jesus' feet in gratitude, praising God "in a loud voice". We can only speculate as to why the other nine didn't return, only hearing the story of the one who returned, and that Jesus mentions the others hadn't. And, as the episode concludes, Jesus affirms this response by pointing out that "your faith has made you well", which means something like, *your trust has been well placed*. When someone routinely makes bad choices in their romantic life we sometimes say that they're looking for love in all the wrong places. Jesus is saying something like the opposite here. These desperately sick people have looked for help and healing in the right place. Their trust has been well placed in Jesus. Ten lives completely transformed in an instant. What's the response?

A few things to note. First, notice that healing and blessing isn't reserved for the grateful, but the needy. When these folks asked Jesus to show mercy, he responded. This is God's generous nature. We aren't given to because of what we can give back. As one scholar notes, the nine who didn't return weren't stricken again with leprosy because they didn't send Jesus a thank you note¹. Blessings come to us with no strings attached. That said,

gifts can be appreciated or not. More importantly, a gift is never an end unto itself. All gifts direct us back to the meaning and power of the relationship from which they come. So this is a story which reminds us that it's possible to miss the main point of blessing. Gifts, all gifts, direct us back to God, our immeasurable treasure. Think of it this way: a blessing is a cup of cold water in the desert. But God is an abundant spring in a cool, green oasis. We very often settle for the occasional cup of water rather than building our home in the oasis.

This leads to the second point. Notice that Jesus says it's "the foreigner" who returns in thanks for the healing. It's another example in Luke's gospel about how no subset of people has the corner on God, the kingdom is open to everyone. Grace is for those in the middle *and* those on the margins. What's interesting in the gospels is how often those "in the middle" don't appreciate what they're seeing and hearing, and how those on the margins do. Even in this leper colony, it's the outsider among the outsiders who returns in praise to God at Jesus' feet, another "despised Samaritan" who is the only one who brings more trust, gives more weight to Jesus by returning in gratitude and devotion. All ten had hollered at Jesus for help in their desperation, only one returns with the *same volume* of gratitude. There's a thought for us: what's our volume when we need something from God? And is that volume matched in our gratitude when we recognize his goodness and blessing on us?

Reading the gospels we see three kinds of people: some reject Jesus (as with a number of the Pharisees we've looked at recently), some people accept and appreciate him, committing themselves to him flat out (maybe like the one healed in this story), and some accept the gifts that spill out from Jesus but don't entirely appreciate or give weight to him (like the nine who didn't return in thanks). Here in Luke 17 we're hearing that a follower of depth will be marked with *humility* and will also be marked with *gratitude and devotion*. Humble service shows that we understand our role in Jesus' kingdom. Gratitude and devotion shows that we understand Jesus' worth and weight in the first place.

So this is one of those stories reminding us that you don't miss Jesus only by rejecting him. *Being a disciple of Jesus* means not just receiving the gifts, but more importantly identifying his great worth, making the daily journey to Jesus' feet in gratitude and worship, which gives our life a very different shape. Every gift of God directs us back to God himself, where our

gratitude, and our ongoing trust and devotion is well placed. A glass of water in the desert now and then is refreshing, no doubt. But the invitation of the gospel is to build our home in the oasis **right next to the spring.**

ⁱ Tom Wright, *Luke For Everyone Bible Commentary*

Discussion Notes:

- What did you take from this story?
- What encouraged or inspired you? What challenged you?
- What gets in the way of active gratitude to God?
- What helps us become increasingly grateful people?