

Only One
(based on Luke 17:11-19)

In the healing of the ten lepers, Jesus does not reach out and touch them. He doesn't say, "Be healed." He tells them to show themselves to the priest. He was telling them to *act as if* they were healed, and they were healed. In faith they started out, and they were healed along the way.

The ten who acted in faith were healed, but just one came back and praised God and was grateful. Jesus asks him, "Where are the nine? We could assume that Jesus felt some sort of hurt because nobody thanked Him. But I think He was disappointed more than He was hurt. Jesus tells the leper who came back, "Your faith has made you well". Then were healed, but only one was made well, and that's for more important than just being healed. Unless gratitude is a part of our nature, we can't be whole people. The other nine were merely healed. If ingratitude is more deadly than leprosy, they were in worse shape than before. Only one came back and was made whole.

There was a man who had a friend and he went to him and said, "How could you do this to me? Who picked you up out of the gutter? Who gave you your first job? Who lent you money and bailed you out of jail? And the man's friend replied, "You did, that's true. But what have you done for me lately?"

Don't we do the same thing with God? God is only as good to us as his last answered prayer the way we wanted it to be answered. Don't we keep a running tally in our minds of all the times God has let us down?

On the other hand, there are those people who go through life with a great sense of wonder and gratitude for every circumstance. There's an old story of an immigrant shop keeper whose son came to see him one day

complaining. “Dad, I don’t understand how you run this store. You keep your accounts payable in a cigar box. Your accounts receivable are on a spindle. All your cash is in the register. You never know what your profits are.”

“Son, let me tell you something,” answered his dad. “When I arrived in this land all I owned was the pants I was wearing. Now your sister is a doctor. Your brother is a teacher. You are a CPA. Your mother and I own a house and a car and this little store. Add that all up and subtract the pants and there is your profit.” A whole well person has a sense of gratitude for any and all good fortune.

But what does gratitude feel like? How do we identify its presence in our hearts? For me, gratitude sometimes feels like a tightly budded rose slowly unfolding in the chambers of my heart. At other times, gratitude feels like fireworks exploding in the center of my soul.

Whether gentle or intense, these moments of gratitude demand a response – a tear rolling southward on my cheek, a quick prayer, a hastily made phone call or a bear hug delivered to the one who has been for me the “bearer of God’s grace.”

But in order for us to get to a level of gratitude, we need to live in a state of forgiveness. In order to do that we must be willing to forgive those who have wounded us in the past. Whether your parents deserted you, abused you, drank too much, tried to possess and control you – whatever their sin, forgive them and move on. Whether they loved you wisely or unwisely, it doesn’t matter. Whatever they were, forgive them and bless them for your own sake. Perhaps it was a friend who betrayed you, spoke ill of you, falsely accused you. Perhaps a relative violated your trust. Please don’t misunderstand me; forgiving them doesn’t make their actions right. In

the eyes of God, it certainly doesn't get them off the hook, so to speak. But it does begin to give you a sense of healing so that we can be whole people. And only then can we be free to accept the bearers of grace when they come.

Jesus was the bearer of God's grace to the ten lepers who called out to him as he walked the road to Jerusalem. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" they petitioned from a safe distance. And Jesus, ever compassionate, tells the ten to 'show themselves to the priests.' While they are on the way to the temple, their leprosy is healed. The rest of the story is legendary – ten were healed, but only one, and a Samaritan at that, returned to thank the healer.

The truth is that we are sometimes on both sides of the parable. Sometimes we are found among the nine ingrates and sometimes we are the only one who comes back to thank Jesus.

One theologian calls this dual aspect of our nature the battle between the gracious and the greedy. The greedy side of us overconsumes all the good things of life. It's rather like the tale of the old Scotsman who kept the Sabbath and anything else he could his hands on!

The gracious side, on the other hand, meets life with a sense of humility at the manifest blessings all around us. That side takes only what it needs and makes sure all understand that the gifts are meant for all.

So, let us take a look at these two sides of ourselves.

First, when we are among the nine, what is it that keeps us from coming back to God in gratitude?

There are a dozen answers. We are too busy, too self-absorbed, too taken up in the whirl of each day. We are too wealthy, or too poor, or too worried about the current state of our lives.

We care too much about ourselves and too little for others. We are striving too hard to get ahead. We are too bitter about past hurts, too

demanding of other people, and our expectations for what we deserve in this life are entirely too high. At least a dozen answers.

What worries me most, though, about my own ingratitude, is that too often it stems from my tendency to be more rational than faith-full. How often have I, in my oh-so-modern wisdom, explained away God's grace with a ton of rationalizations?

Charles L. Brown suggests that the nine cured lepers who did not return with gratitude might have used these rationalizations.

One waited to see if the cure was real.

One waited to see if it would last.

One said that he would see Jesus later.

One decided that he had never had leprosy.

One said he would have gotten well anyway.

One gave the glory to the priests.

One said, "O well, Jesus didn't really do anything."

One said, "Any rabbi could have done it."

And the last of the nine said, "I was already much improved."

The point is that gratitude rarely grows from a rationalizing heart. Gratitude grows from an open heart, a believing heart, a heart willing to believe that God can and does offer us grace-filled gifts that cannot be explained away by rationalization. Or as Charles Jefferson notes, "Gratitude is born in hearts that take time to count up past mercies."

Which leads to our exploration of the other side of us. What makes us come back to God with grateful hearts?

What makes us come back are powerful infusions of grace. We are going about in our heady preoccupied state, and, wham, grace breaks through and rips the blinders from our eyes. And then we can see:

The smile in that stranger's eyes when she looks our way.

The puffed-up sparrow in a winter tree disclosing perfectly the beauty of God's creation.

The apology that is accepted without one judgmental word.

The snide remark withheld; the sarcastic word suspended.

The healing that comes from one kind word delivered to us on a bad day.

The utter miracle contained in each breath we take, each sunrise we witness, each day of this magical mystery tour we call a human life.

And the absolute injustice of some feasting happily on God's plenty, while others go hungry in the night.

Jimmy Carter once said, "the greatest discrimination of all is the discrimination of the rich against the poor." Often we refuse to reach out to strangers who are different from us. We choose to be indifferent to or ignorant of the sufferings of the people...around us in order not to disturb, but to protect our privileges, security and comfort. As a result, to many people, our Christianity is not representing the spirit and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is only when grace has removed our blinders that we can begin to allow our graciousness to overcome our greed. And that is the moment when our gratitude is perfected in God's sight.

And finally, once we have mastered living in a state of forgiveness and being able to accept the grace that is offered to us can we truly begin to praise God.

This one leper, a Samaritan in our parable, came back praising God and yet he still had enormous problems. His leprosy was healed, but he had been living as an outcast with no family and no job. He had no home and no

village. Yet he is praising God even in the midst of his unsolved problems. There is much evidence in scripture about when and how we are to praise God even in the midst our own problems. Ephesians 5:20 says, “Give thanks to God for all things.” I Thess. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” And also in Romans, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

Each of us has a problem, even right now. Nobody is problem-free. Think about how you can praise God in that present problem. We believe that sin abounds in the world. We hurt people. We are hurt by others. We even hurt ourselves. It is simply part of our imperfect world, that fell from grace a long time ago. There is pain and there is illness. There is death and loss and grief. There are small problems that nag us constantly and big problems that immobilize us from doing anything at all.

Focus on the belief that God is bigger than the problem and is present right now in the middle of this painful thing you’re caught up in. Paul writes in Philippians, “For I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.”

An attitude of praise and thanksgiving brings an attitude of victory over all things. Because it is at this level of living that God’s power can break through in the most dramatic ways.

Friends, forgive those who have hurt you and begin a new journey. Hear God’s message of grace that has been given to you and be healed. Come to God in thanksgiving for all things and be made well.

AMEN.