

Returning with the One

Introduction

The Text

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” ¹⁴ When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:11–19)

Five Observations

- A. This morning I simply want to take our text and from it draw out five observations. I’m not going to give them all to you up front as I usually do, they’ll just kind of unfold and build on one another as we proceed.

Observation #1: God Reaches through the Physical to Touch the Spiritual

“Leprosy”

- A. Before I can really take us deeper into this first observation, we should take a moment at the beginning here to make sure we’re clear on what these ten lepers were up against.
- B. When we use the term “leprosy” now in modern times we usually have a specific disease in view: namely, Hansen’s Disease. You’ve probably seen it in pictures and things.
 - 1. But in the Greek and Hebrew (as your Bible translations may even note), while the word would probably include things like Hansen’s Disease, it could refer to several different skin diseases—all of which would’ve been nasty and unpleasant in their own right.
- C. But the physical, health issues were really only the start of the individual’s suffering. Because of the danger of contagion and the spread of such things to others in Israel, the leper was deemed unclean and totally ostracized from society until he could be officially declared as cured by a priest.
 - 1. So we read in the ancient texts of the Torah such directives as those in [Lev 13:45-56](#): “⁴⁵ The leprous person . . . shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ ⁴⁶ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

- a. So, moving back up these verses: Lepers must live outside the camp (they were required to observe a fifty-pace buffer so as not to contaminate people or places [PNTC]).
 - b. They would tear their clothes and make their appearance as haggard as possible so that people know not to approach.
 - c. And if anyone did start to approach, they must yell out: “Unclean, unclean”, as if to say: “Get away from me or you will be contaminated to!”
 - i. This explains why in our text these ten lepers don’t dare get too close to Jesus. Indeed, we read that they “stood at a distance and lifted up their voices [from there], saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us’” (vv. 12-13).
- D. All of this has led one commentator to write: “The social consequences of leprosy were perhaps worse than the illness itself Leprosy was a sentence of social ostracism. The disease deprived victims not only of health, but of their names, occupations, social habits, families, fellowship, and worshiping communities. Leprosy contaminated Israel’s status as a holy people Other illnesses had to be healed, but leprosy had to be cleansed Josephus [the Jewish historian] speaks of the banishment of lepers as those ‘in no way differing from a corpse’ (Ant. 3.264)” (PNTC).
- 1. So this is beyond hard. This is devastatingly rough.

Reaching through the Physical

- A. And now I am telling you that, one of the things this story in [Luke 17](#) brings out is that God reaches through the physical to touch the spiritual. What do I mean by that?
 - 1. I mean that leprosy, as bad as it is, is really a physical parable of something so much worse, namely, our sinfulness and spiritually unclean status before God, such that we can’t fellowship with Him or others rightly.
- B. God has always used the physical to get at the spiritual. We see this in the Scriptures both negatively and positively.

(1) Negatively

- A. Negatively, we consider the fall of man and the curse. Man’s sin and rebellion against God didn’t just have spiritual consequences but physical ones as well. It is because of man’s sin that God curses the world—thorns, sweat, labor, relational strife, suffering, death.
 - 1. God reaches through the physical to touch the spiritual. He leads us through physical realities towards the spiritual realities. He knows that we might not feel the burden of our sinfulness in itself, but O how we feel it when it touches our skin, don’t we? We get that things are serious then.
- B. Parents know what I’m talking about. When parenting we have to deal with the same sorts of things. When my kid disobeys me, I might say, “O that breaks my heart, your disobedience hurts our relationship—in other words there’s a spiritual, more intangible, problem with what you just did.”

1. But, often, they don't care about that. They don't feel that. "Breaks your heart? Hurts our relationship? Whatever Dad. Okay, I'm sorry."
 - a. So what do you do to make them feel the ugliness of disobedience and disrespect? How do you get them to sense the spiritual gravity of their actions? You reach through the physical. You take away TV time or dessert or playdates or whatever. And suddenly: "No! Don't, don't! I'm so sorry! I won't ever do that again!"
 - i. They feel something of the spiritual yuck because of the consequences it brought on them in the physical realm of things.

(2) Positively

A. We see this connection more positively framed in our text.

1. Jesus is God's answer to our physical and deeper spiritual dilemma. Jesus came not just to heal the body, but to heal the soul.
 - a. As such, all the healings in the gospels are not ends in themselves. They are parables of a greater redemption that Jesus is going to accomplish for us on the cross in His death and resurrection.
 - i. He is taking spiritually deformed, unclean, dead, blind, lame people and making them whole again. He is taking the spiritually ostracized and outcast and bringing them home to God.

B. And He gets at this reality by reaching through the physical. He alerts us to His power and authority to forgive sin by manifesting that power and authority in His healing of the body and intervening in earthly circumstance.

1. We can feel that. And it leads us in to something deeper, more fundamental, more comprehensive.

C. I think this is really the meaning of the last verse in our text. It might not be as evident to us in the English, but the Greek is telling and I wanted to bring that out for you here.

1. Look at [v. 19](#) and what Jesus to this man who returns to thank Him and praise God: "[And he said to him, 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.'](#)"
 - a. The Greek word translated "[made well](#)" here is the word *sozo* = saved: "[Your faith has saved you!](#)"

D. I think the point here is that, where the other nine found mere physical healing, this man has found the full healing, the full "salvation" that is in Christ. This man let Jesus reach through the physical and touch his heart and soul.

1. This man saw his need as deeper than skin. It was a matter of sin-stain in the heart, leprosy on the inside, the disease that plagues the soul and renders a man unclean before God regardless of how spotless the externals. He gets it. And because of this, Jesus says, his faith has saved him.
 - a. As one commentator concludes: “This one had been not only physically healed but spiritually healed as well (17:19). Whereas the other nine received God’s word and believed for a time, they fell short of the ultimate healing, i.e., experiencing the divine salvation” (NAC).

Observation #2: Our Trials Are Trustworthy Friends

- A. This is related to the first. If it is true that the physical is in some ways a parable of the spiritual. And if it is true that spiritually we are all prone to wander into sin and rebellion, then it follows that trials are not our enemies but our friends.
 1. Suffering wakes us up to our mortality and dependency and need for mercy. It pushes us to ask for help where in pride we would rather not. We come alive to our inadequacies. We feel tangibly and physically what has always been true spiritually—things aren’t all right with us and we need help from God.
- B. Our trials are more honest than our gains and comforts and riches.
 1. When all is going well we are prone to think ourselves self-sufficient, independent, secure, and so forth. We congratulate ourselves as if we have been the source of our success. We become like Nebuchadnezzar strutting atop his palace roof: “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan 4:30).
 - a. But as he would soon learn and as we, indeed, must learn it is but an illusion, a façade, a distraction, a smokescreen, a mirage, a foundation of sand, a flower in a field, a vapor in the wind.
 - i. Our riches, our comforts, our successes, they lie to us, they deceive us, they numb us into self-confidence and pride. Our good days lean in like Judas to betray us with a kiss.
 2. But our hard days are far more honest and kind and instructive. They tell us who we really are and how we really are doing and what we really need.
- C. These lepers have been, who knows for how long, in the wilderness, quite literally, outside the gate, outside civilized society, kept at a distance, banished from humanity.
 1. And it’s awakened them, it’s instructed them, so that when they hear that Jesus is in town, they cry out for mercy. No pride here. Just humble desperation. Honesty. They’re in touch with reality. They know they need!

D. You've known this sort of thing haven't you? You were complacent to the things of God, because life was going well. And then trial struck. And then life got hard. And then things went wrong . . . and it opened you up to God and your need for Him.

1. That's how I got saved! And that's how Jesus keeps pulling me closer.

a. The suffering, the trial, we're prone to see it as a closed door—a closed door on our dreams, on our joy, on our hopes. But really it's an open door—an open door to deeper fellowship with God.

i. And it's in that sense that I say Our Trials Are Trustworthy Friends. They keep pushing us back to Him.

Observation #3: Grace is Given in the Going

A. This is an interesting one. I wonder if you've noticed that Jesus' miracles don't always happen in the same way.

1. Sometimes He just speaks and it happens. Like when he casts a demon out from that man back in [Luke 4](#): "[Be silent and come out of him!](#)" (v. 35). And everyone witnessing this just marvels saying to one another: "[What is this word?](#)" (v. 36).
2. Sometimes He enacts the miracle by physical touch. So the leper we saw back in [Luke 5](#), we read: "[Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ' . . . \[B\]e clean'](#)" (v. 13) . . . and the man was healed.

B. But other times He asks a person to first respond in faith before the miracle happens, to move on His command and trust that grace and power will meet them in motion.

1. So to the man with the withered hand in [Luke 6](#) Jesus says: "[Stretch out your hand](#)" (v. 10). Now if I'm that dude I'm saying that's a cruel joke. "What do you mean, 'Stretch out your hand?' It's withered. That's the point. I can't. I don't have a working hand."
 - a. But Jesus says, "Stretch it out." And this guy says: "I don't know how I'm going to do that but if Jesus of Nazareth is commanding it I'm going to give it a try." And as he stretches out his hand "[his hand was restored](#)" (v. 10).
 - i. If he would have objected, the grace would not have been given. It met him in motion. Faith, moving on word, met with power and miracle.
2. To give you one OT example, I wonder if you remember the way God commanded his people to pass through the Jordan River and into the land of promise.

- a. We would think, it would be something similar to the way they crossed the Red Sea—God parted the waters and they walked through on dry ground.
- b. But it is not that way. He is not just going to cut off the waters so they can see first before taking that step. "[\[W\]hen the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the](#)

waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap” (Josh 3:13).

- i. “You have to take the step in the water before the water will be stopped. Do you get it? My grace, my power will meet you in motion. As you step out in faith the miracle will meet you in that moment. But if you don’t step, the waters won’t stop.”
- C. Here is why I say Grace Is Given in the Going. Because this is precisely the sort of thing we see happening in the story of these lepers.
1. Leon Morris sums it up for us on this point: “He did not come to them or touch them. He did not even say, ‘You are cured!’ He told them, leprous as they were, to go and show themselves to the priests, the normal procedure when a leper was cured. The priest acted as a kind of health inspector to certify that the cure had in fact taken place (Lev. 14:2ff.). Jesus was putting their faith to the test by asking these men to act as though they had been cured. And as they obeyed so it happened: ‘as they went they were cleansed’ [v. 15]” (TNTC).
 - a. Did you catch that? Jesus says: “Go and show yourselves to the priests” (v. 14)—something a leper was only supposed to do if and when he was already cured. But these lepers—spots and rashes and boils and all—hear the command of Christ, and they get up and go.
 - i. They believe that, though they are not already clean, surely they will be by the time they get there. They had a sense that grace would be given to them in the going.
- D. This is hard for people like us. We like to see before we step, to know before we go. We do our calculations and our planning, we get our ducks in a row, and minimize all our risks. And then, only if we can see it working out favorably for us, we will step out towards it.
1. Well, brothers and sisters, such things do not display a faith in God but betray, rather, a dominating and dangerous faith in self.
- E. Listen, there may be something right now in your life God is calling you to do, calling you to step out in faith on, and you’re waffling on it, you’re going back and forth on it. Rather than waiting until you get it all figured out, take a step, and watch as His grace is given in the going.

Observation #4: Healing Is for Homecoming

At Jesus’ Feet

- A. What I mean by this here is really brought out in vv. 15-16: “¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.”

- B. This returns a bit to what I was talking about with the first observation. Jesus is healing the body, but He is after so much more than that. Ultimately, He is after restoring the person in relationship with Himself. He's wanting to bring us home. The miracles, the help that comes when we cry out for mercy, it is meant to lead us to Him.
1. And this one leper gets it! (That he was a Samaritan is important, but I don't have time reflect much on that. Suffice it to say it would be shocking for Jews to hear. The gospel always breaks paradigms and stereotypes. Here we see an outsider of outsiders is the first to be brought back in!)
 - a. But he gets it. "Something more than a healing has happened here. Jesus is coming after my heart. And I want to give it to Him."
- C. I think the beauty in this moment is best captured when we contrast the picture in v. 16 with what we saw back up in v. 12. In v. 12 this leper is with the others "[standing] at a distance." But then here now in v. 16, where is He? "[H]e fell on his face at Jesus' feet . . ."
1. He breaks through the safety zone once required when He was leprous and throws himself at the feet of Jesus. He's been cleansed. He's welcome. He's home. Healing is for Homecoming.

Where Are the Nine?

- A. But they don't all come back, do they? They were all there with this Samaritan begging Jesus for mercy. They all, in humble desperation were calling Him "Master" (v. 13)— a title used elsewhere only by Jesus' disciples.
1. But was He really their master? Were they really His disciples? Or is it not that they just wanted something from Him and once they got it they were gone?!
 - a. I think that's the question to linger on. Because that's where we are so much of the time. We want God's help, but do we want Him?
- B. Imagine all that opened up to them in an instant when once they realized they were healed! They could re-enter society. They could come back into the realm of family and friend. They could work, they could rest, they could sit at table and eat and drink, they could take a wife and have kids, and on and on.
1. The world was theirs for the taking once more. At last, they could enjoy the good things of life. And so they're gone.
 - a. As one commentator notes: "apparently the nine were so absorbed in their new happiness that they could not spare a thought for its source" (TNTC). They missed it—they missed the point of the healing. And they went running after other things—lesser things!
- C. I got a very vivid picture of this sort of thing when I was reading through the book of Exodus a few weeks back. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the golden calf incident.

1. God dramatically frees the Israelites from slavery to the Egyptians and He leads them out to Sinai and there calls Moses up on the mount to give him the law.
 2. And while Moses is up there, the people get restless, they get angry, and Aaron decides since Moses and YHWH have apparently abandoned them, it's time to make for ourselves another God like the other nations have, so he wants to fashion for them an idol.
 3. So gets a fire going and tells them to gather up all their rings of gold and jewelry and stuff. He puts it in the fire, begins to fashion and engrave and makes a golden calf. And he declares: "Here is your God, O Israel!"
- D. Now, you probably have no idea how this connects at this point. But let me cut to it by asking the question that confused me at first: Okay, so they made this idol, this false god, from golden jewelry and things . . . well, where did these people who were poor, destitute slaves just days ago get all this valuable stuff? (They didn't have Amazon Prime. It wasn't like they could just order up something fancy and have it dropped off outside their tent there in the desert. So where did they get it?)
1. Answer: It was the spoils God graciously granted to them from the Exodus. He told them that His favor would so be upon them that as the Egyptians were thrusting them out, they could ask for silver and gold jewelry and it would be given them ([Exo 11:2](#); [12:35-36](#)).
 - a. Don't you see, they cried out for deliverance. "Free us God, help us God, we are tired of being slaves."
 - b. God, in mercy, hears and acts and showers them with blessing.
 - c. And they take that blessing and run from Him with it. They take the spoils of His mercy and grace and use it to fashion idols for themselves.
 - i. God intended this to be the material from which the tabernacle and its instruments would be fashioned for worship unto Him. But they took it and used it in service of their worship of other gods.
- E. And we, brothers and sisters, like the Israelites, like these nine lepers, are prone to the very same thing.
1. We call on God when things are going bad and forget to return in worship when things are going well. O Mercy Hill let's not run off with the nine. Let's return with the one!

Observation #5: The Lord Becomes the Leper

- A. Here's the last thing that needs to be said before we close. I wonder if you noticed the way our text began. Luke is careful to note that all of this goes down while Jesus is "[o]n the way to Jerusalem . . ." ([v. 11](#)).
- B. And this isn't the first time he's mentioned this:
1. [Luke 9:51](#): "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (cf. [v. 53](#)).

2. [Luke 13:22](#): “He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem” (cf. v. 33).
 3. And then he mentions it again in our text here.
- C. Why? What is Jesus going to do in Jerusalem? Why is He going there? Why is that relevant to this story about lepers being cleansed?
1. Well, Jesus Himself, tells us why He’s on His way to Jerusalem just a chapter over in [Luke 18:31-33](#): “³¹ And taking the twelve, he said to them, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon.³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.’”
- D. Here’s why this is important to our story this morning. Jesus is not a magician. He doesn’t just make our leprosy and sin disappear. He is not an illusionist.
1. He is a priest, or perhaps more appropriately, He is a sacrifice. He does not merely wave His wand and make the curse disappear, He bears the curse in His own body.
- E. Here is why I say The Lord Becomes the Leper. See Him there on the cross. What is happening? I will tell you.
1. He is becoming the unclean thing.
 2. He is suffering outside the gate.
 3. He is banished from humanity, ostracized from His own Father.
 4. He is taking upon Himself our sin and all the effects of the curse that came along with it upon Himself. And He is letting it have its way with Him.
 - a. So that three days later, when He rises from the dead, He can declare victory over all that’s held us in bondage and offer the spoils of that victory to us freely in the gospel.
- F. This is why He is worthy of our worship! This is why we don’t go running off with the nine, but we return with the one—to give thanks and praise!