

# Luke 17.11–19

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## *How can I give thanks?*

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Remembrance Sunday

### **Introduction**

Today is one of those solemn occasions during the year, which give us time to pause and reflect – today on those who have given their lives, brave men and women who put themselves in harm's way to protect others, to protect us.

But it is not enough simply to remember them – as a Christian I also want to give thanks to God: for their sacrifice, and for Jesus, who gave *his* life so that *we* might live.

That's why I chose the reading we heard from Luke's gospel, because it helps us think about what it means to give thanks.

# The Ten Lepers

Luke tells us that Jesus was **on his way to Jerusalem** (11). His journey took him along the border between Galilee – a northern outpost of Judean *immigrants* – and Samaria – a land of *foreigners*, who had their own corrupted version of the Jewish faith.

Jesus was on the edge of acceptable society, and **as he was going into a village**, he met **ten men who had leprosy** (12).

The term ‘leprosy’ in the Bible covers a variety of skin diseases, all of them unpleasant and all of them contagious. As a result ‘lepers’ were forced to live outside the villages and towns in small colonies. According to the Law they had to **wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’** (Leviticus 13.45).

Although these **ten men** *didn’t* yell, ‘Unclean!’, they *did* stand a respectful distance away – yet their desperation was still clear. They begged Jesus for help, **‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’** (13).

Usually Jesus calls people towards him – one of our communion prayers says how he touched untouchables with love. But here, he kept his distance, instead telling them to, **‘Go, show yourselves to the priests’** (14).

Jesus doesn't say, 'Be healed!' or anything like that – yet that's precisely what happened: **as they went, they were cleansed** (14).

The lepers understood that when Jesus told them to go to the priest, he was implying they would be healed. Whereas Leviticus 13 details what people had to do when they had a skin disease, Leviticus 14 says what to do when the skin disease disappears.

When that happened, people would show themselves to a priest, who would check the infection had gone. If it had, the person had to wash all their clothes, and shave off *all* their hair. They then had to wait seven days, before washing their clothes, shaving off all their hair again, and making a sacrifice of lamb, flour, and olive oil – at the end of which the priest would pronounce them 'clean'.

Notice the difference between being 'healed' and being 'clean' – the person is 'healed' at the start of all that, but it then took over a week before they were 'clean', and able to rejoin their family.

Although it began with physical healing, being 'cleansed' was far more than that – it went deeper, bringing ritual healing too.

When Jesus told the ten lepers to show themselves to the priests, he implied they would be not only healed but also cleansed, if they obeyed him, and went. They did, and were!

**As they went, they were cleansed** (14). Jesus didn't simply heal them physically; **as they went** in obedience, Jesus **cleansed** them, skipping the eight days of washing their clothes, shaving off their hair and making sacrifices.

One of them realised **he was healed** – he saw the physical signs of his disease disappear – and so he **came back**, making a racket, **praising God in a loud voice** (15). **He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him** (16).

Luke saves the sucker punch until now. Like a good storyteller he hinted at it to begin with – Jesus was walking on the border of Samaria, whose people were the sworn enemy of the Jews. And yet, of the ten lepers who were healed, the only one who returned to say thank-you **was a Samaritan** (16).

## **Healed... cleansed... saved...**

Now I don't normally bombard you with Greek in my sermons but as I was studying this passage I realised Luke uses three different words here to refer to the lepers being healed:

- ἐκαθαρίσθησαν (from καθαρίζω meaning 'cleanse')
- ἰάθη (from ἰάομαι meaning 'physically heal')
- σέσωκέν (from σωζω meaning 'save' or 'give life')

When the lepers left Jesus the word is ἐκαθαρίσθησαν – they were *cleansed*, healed and made ritually clean by Jesus. That is also the word Jesus used when he says, **‘Were not all ten cleansed?’** (17).

When the Samaritan realised **he was healed** (15) the word is ἰάθη – he had been physically healed, he saw that the signs of the illness had disappeared from his skin.

And at the end, when Jesus said, **‘Rise and go; your faith has made you well’** (19) the word is σέσωκέν – as in, **‘the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost’** (Luke 19.10). It doesn’t simply mean ‘heal’, it means ‘rescue’, it means ‘salvation’ – from the deeper sickness that is the sin within all our hearts.

Jesus said, **‘Rise and go; your faith has saved you.’**

## ***Sola fide***

Some of you may know that a couple of weeks ago marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Martin Luther’s primary insight, which rocked the church to its core, and recovered a key element of the gospel, he called *sola fide*, ‘by faith alone’.

In other words we cannot do anything to earn God’s forgiveness, to earn our salvation – it is a gift, received by faith alone.

There are two common mistakes when we hear things like this, when we hear Jesus say things like, ‘**your faith has saved you**’, both of which we can avoid with gratitude.

The first common mistake is to think we are saved by the power of our faith. ‘If only I could have your faith!’ people sometimes say to me. Sometimes deep down we think that if only we could have a little *more* faith, we would truly be saved.

In this passage, when we see Jesus commend the Samaritan for his faith, we might think that he was healed because he had such a strong faith.

But that doesn’t make sense – because all *ten* were healed, all *ten* believed Jesus would make them well, because all *ten* obeyed his command to go and show themselves to the priest. But only *one* was commended for his faith – only *one* was *saved*.

You see, the important thing about *faith that saves* is *not* how strong it is, but the one we have faith *in*: Jesus. It wasn’t the act of *going* that demonstrated the Samaritan leper’s faith – *it was the act of coming back* – coming back to Jesus to say thank you.

The Samaritan leper wasn’t saved by having a *strong* faith, he was saved by acknowledging it was *Jesus* who had healed him.

The second common mistake is to think we are saved by believing the right things, as though there is a checklist of teachings or doctrines to learn, and if we can memorise and take them all to heart, *then* we will be saved.

But that isn't right either. The truth *is* important, and there *are* teachings in the Bible that we need to learn, listen to and take to heart – but that comes *after* not *before* we are saved. There is no heavenly entrance exam, there is no salvation checklist.

Gratitude guards against this mistake as well. When we realise that salvation isn't an exam result, it is a free gift from God, what can we do but cry, 'Thank you!' to God, like the Samaritan leper?

Do you see how gratitude helps us understand what faith, *sola fide*, truly means? Faith that saves is faith *in Jesus*; faith that saves is faith *in life as a free gift from God*.

This is why all ten lepers were *healed*, all ten lepers were *cleansed*, but only one leper was *saved*. He alone showed faith by *coming back to Jesus*, and by *saying, 'Thank you'*.

Today, as we remember and give thanks for those who have given their lives for the freedom of others, how might we respond to the even greater gift of life, given freely by God in Jesus?