

The Text: St. Luke 17:11-19

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.”

The Sermon

Dearly beloved in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

An introduction to the present Gospel. Our Gospel tells the story of ten leprous men. They cry to Christ for mercy. He tells them to go to the priests. They obey, and on the way, they are healed miraculously of their leprosy.

Luke tells us that one of them was a foreigner, not a Jew, but a Samaritan. He was from the land that used to be northern Israel before it was destroyed seven centuries earlier by the Assyrians. So the Samaritans were a mixture of those lost Israelites and the populations that came in to repopulate the land. Consequently, the Samaritans had a corrupted worship of God; they did not have the temple worship at Jerusalem; and they could not trace a pure lineage back to their father, Abraham. Therefore, the Jews often despised them.

But Luke tells us that the Samaritan, and not the other nine, returned and gave thanks to Christ after being healed. Christ receives him, and comforts him with these wonderful words: “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” The Samaritan, acknowledging God’s mercy in Christ, was moved to give thanks to God through him.

Examples from Scripture of commands to thank God. It’s almost redundant to cite examples of commands to thank God, but let’s consider a few familiar verses. Psalm 118, a traditional prayer before eating: “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his mercy endures forever.” Psalm 100: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name.” And Saint Paul says, Colossians 3: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ... and be thankful.” It is God’s will for us that we should thank him.

That Scripture does not command us to thank God for his own benefit. But Scripture doesn’t urge us to thank God for his own benefit. God lacks nothing. He needs nothing. He has and owns everything in the world. Listen to Psalm 24: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.”

God is not a tyrant who commands his subjects to publicly glorify him. He is not a governor who needs his people to obey him to ensure public order. He is not a job-seeker, asking for references to get a better job.

That Scripture commands us to thank God for our own benefit. Think of a mother who commands her child to come and eat dinner. It's in the child's best interest to come and eat. Think of a paramedic who pleads with a greatly injured person, to hang on to life and keep breathing. You see, the command to thank God, is for our benefit. We are better off when we thank God.

Because when we thank God in Jesus Christ, we remember the great love that God has for you and me in him. And the remembrance of God's love in Christ keeps you and me going through difficult times. But on the other hand, when we do not thank God, we can become blind to all of God's help and love and mercy; to all of his many gifts to us, which can cheer and gladden our heart.

Why thanking God is difficult to do. But you and I know—don't we?—that thanking God is an incredibly difficult thing to do. Remember the nine healed lepers who did not return to thank Christ. Why didn't they? We don't know for sure. But we could think of some likely possibilities. Perhaps they took their ethnicity for granted and didn't have a due sense of their unworthiness. Perhaps they thought that, since the Messiah was promised to Abraham, it was their right to be healed by the Messiah. Or perhaps they simply forgot. Maybe they got distracted by the jobs they had before they became leprous.

Whatever the case may have been, we similarly are often drawn away from thanking God. At times we are bombarded by the business of life, and simply forget. At other times we forget God's many gifts; how he is the one who has brought through many countless, invisible dangers; how he has given us his Word and Sacraments in this place, which many of us have received from childhood. And what's more, the flesh still remains in us, which resists thanking God. Because one thanks God, only after trusting him and loving him. And this the flesh cannot do.

How we may be moved to thank God by remembering God's mercy. How, then, can we be moved to thank God? We cannot remove ourselves completely from the cares of this life. We can't remove our flesh in this life. We can't even move ourselves to thank God by pounding the commands of God into our head. Why? Because the commands of God do not make us desire to thank God. They simply show us that we should thank him. They do not move us inwardly to thank him.

Instead, we can be moved to thank God only by remembering his great mercy toward us.

Think of the Samaritan again. And remember that word that Christ spoke to him: Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." That is, "your faith (a gift from God), has led you to acknowledge this great mercy that you have received from me. Since you have acknowledged me as Lord and Christ (a gift from God), since you have

acknowledged your unworthiness, (a gift from God), since you have acknowledged what you have received from me (a gift from God); therefore you are made well, and alive, so that you have come and given me thanks.”

Only faith in God’s mercy can move a person to thank him.

Consider all you have received from God. Food, clothing, housing. His gifts are innumerable, which he has given us freely, because of his loving, fatherly heart.

And think of all of the invisible dangers God delivers you from. I wish, at times, that we could see all of these instances. We cross streets, and are kept safe from distracted drivers. We are defended against various diseases and sicknesses. Think also, of terrible dreams in the night that we sometimes have. How do we know whether or not that such dreams are the result of spirits trying to attack us, and end our life early? And how do we know whether or not it is God who sends his angels to defend us in those hours, while we are completely unaware of the fact? Yes, I think if we could perceive all of these invisible instances in which God has so amazingly helped us, our heart would overflow with thanks.

Think back to the Samaritan. Let’s imagine: what if Christ did not heal him? Certainly he had the right to do so or not. Now, would the Samaritan still have had many things to thank God for? Certainly. He had life in the first place, which is itself a free gift of God.

So it is with you and me. Even if we had only trouble and suffering and pain in the world, I think even then it would still be right to thank God. Why? Because God has given us life and existence. At times God raises up especially incredibly people to show us this fact. Think of those people, who are born in incredibly suffering. What do we sometimes see? That they are thankful and happy. Because they have been given the gift to acknowledge that life itself is a gift. So, even if this life were all we had—and even if it were a horribly, painful life—we would still be bound to thank God.

But here’s the thing: this life is not all that God has given us. The Christian hope is not just of a present life, that will someday end. No, Christian hope is for things inestimably more glorious, given to us in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, we have healing from the disease of sin, and the pledge of an eternal life, because of the righteousness he obtained for us, by his life, and by his death on the cross.

So remember that just like the Samaritan was, we are unworthy of anything from God. Because we, like the Samaritan, were deeply infected by the leprosy of sin. Just as the lepers were prevented from living in society in the ancient world, so also you and I were prevented by sin from living in the family and society of God. Because God is completely pure and holy, and nothing unclean can dwell before him.

And just as Christ freely healed the poor man, so has he freely healed you and me. Because we have been washed in the cleansing waters of Baptism, we have been

joined to Christ, in whose blood we have redemption and cleansing and healing for all of our sins.

We cannot praise or glorify this mercy of Christ enough. Sin is truly a leprous thing. If we were lost by ourselves, our sin would have spread and infected every aspect of our life here, and even our eternal life. Think, for example, of how one unkind word can spiral out of control, to the point that entire relationships are destroyed. Remember also that infamous assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, just over a century ago now, that sparked the fire which turned into the conflagration of the First World War. That is how sin is. And we cannot even begin to comprehend the darkness that we would be in, had we been left alone in our sin.

Oh how great is Christ's mercy for humankind! He came from the Father with this work: to restore life to us. That is his work. That is his person and character: he is the life-giver. He is the healer. He is the one who, when we come to him, extends his hand, full of healing, compassion, forgiveness, and help. Therefore, whenever you approach Christ in repentance, in prayer, in his Word, seek him as who he truly is. Seek him just as the lepers sought him: as the one who wants to heal you and to help you. And when the heart approaches Christ in this way, in faith in his mercy, only then is the heart moved to thank God the Father through Christ for all the benefits it has received from him.

A connection with Communion. Think of that portion of the Communion liturgy, where the Pastor and the people say back and forth: "Lift up your hearts." "We lift them up unto the Lord." "Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God." "It is good and right so to do."

Why do we begin the Communion, with an encouragement to thank God?

We do so, to confess the truth of what happens in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper, we truly meet the one who cleanses us of all our sicknesses and infirmities: Jesus Christ himself. When you come to Christ in the Sacrament, then, you should picture yourself as being in the same state as that Samaritan was, and experiencing the same thing. Here you meet Christ, face to face, though veiled in bread and wine, and you are healed of all of your sin, and all of your sicknesses.

The praise of remembering God's mercy. The remembrance of God's mercy in Christ is like a soothing ointment to a painful wound, since it gives peace to the soul. It is like a cool, refreshing drink on a hot summer day, because it refreshes us when we are weary. It is like the rising, morning sun, as it drives away dark shadows throughout the world, because it causes all dark things that terrify us to flee away.

The beneficial effects of giving thanks. We are moved to give thanks also, when we consider what good things it accomplishes both for our neighbors and for ourselves. When we thank God, especially as we do when we gather together to worship Christ, we publicly confess God's goodness toward us, so that we can hear each other and be strengthened. When you thank God, you encourage your brother or sister to recognize

all the things that he or she has also received from God. To thank God, is to call your neighbor to thank God as well.

And giving thanks to God also encourages our own heart. Because when I thank God, I remember the gifts that he has given me. And when I remember the gifts he has given me, I remember that I am surely a beloved child of God. And when I remember that I am surely a beloved child of God, I can know and be confident, that he will deliver me and stay with me in all of my troubles and afflictions. This is the great effect that thanking God has upon our soul.

A praise of thanksgiving. Blessed is the one who gives thanks to God. Psalm 92: “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing praises to your name, O Most High.” Indeed, it is good to give thanks to the Lord. Such a person abides in God, and becomes like a “flourishing palm tree” (v. 12), which grows and becomes more beautiful and fruitful as it grows old (v. 14).

Dear Christians, this is my wish for all of you in Jesus Christ: that you would be led and moved by the Spirit of God this week, and call to mind all the mercy that you have received from God. And after this, that you would offer him thanks from the heart. And after this, that you would remember this word of Christ: Go your way, my child; your faith has made you well.”