

## A Fifty Yard Dash to Thanksgiving

Luke 17:11-19

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Because we can't physically see God—although we do see His works—and although we can't physically hear God with our ears—although we do read His words in our Bibles—it can be hard to remember to thank God for the blessings He gives us. It's much easier to remember to be grateful when you can see and hear and touch the person you're thanking. When Jesus healed ten lepers, only one remembered to be grateful. Stephen Davey challenges us to be like him in this lesson.

Sometime ago I was sent this article from a member of our church:

On January 12, 2007, a poor man hoping for donations by playing music in public areas had stationed himself at a metro subway station in Washington, DC. Wearing street clothes and a baseball cap, he played on his violin with his violin case open on the pavement in front of him. He was hoping for donations during the morning rush hour.

It was a cold January morning, and most people were uninterested in his dilemma, and besides, they were in a hurry. They didn't notice as he played pieces written by Johann Sebastian Bach with incredible skill.

He played for around 45 minutes, until the crowd thinned away, and rush hour was over.

It was estimated that more than a thousand people walked by this rather hopeless man. In fact, only seven people listened for a moment or two, before hurrying away.

One middle-aged man seemed to recognize him and stopped for a minute or two to listen, then dropped a \$20 dollar bill in his violin case. No one else paid much attention, including a handful of people who tossed some money toward him; at the end of rush hour, he had made \$32.17.

When he finished playing, and the beautiful music stopped, he packed everything up and shuffled away. No one noticed. No one applauded. No one thanked him for filling their hectic morning rush with beautiful melodies.

And no one recognized him either.

Now one knew that three days earlier he had sold out his concert in Boston; no one knew he was playing on his Gibson Stradivarius, worth millions of dollars.

No one knew this was Joshua Bell—the celebrated violinist who had debuted years earlier at the age of 17 in Carnegie Hall.

This Metro Station event was an experiment, cameras had been set up to record people in the crowd, people too busy to offer any kind of thanks to this talented man, or even a tangible donation.

Would anybody notice who he was? Would anybody stop? Would anybody applaud his talent or thank him for brightening their morning rush hour?

The reporter who came up with this event would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize for his documentary on this event at that subway station in Washington, D.C.

It was an experiment that exposed the easily distracted, self-focused, unobservant, ungrateful, side of the human heart.

I don't know about you, but I can see myself in the crowd rushing by and missing the moment.

This kind of event is about to take place in the lives of ten men.

The cameras of divine inspiration have captured this encounter, which took no more than 45 minutes at best to record.

Luke the inspired reporter documents the event in his gospel account.

Today we're back in **Luke chapter 17** and now, with cameras rolling, so to speak, let's watch what happens next in **verse 11**:

*On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."*

*Luke 17:11-13*

Let's travel back to this world Luke is describing for us.

Jesus and His disciples are arriving just at the edge of town, on the border of a village that remains unnamed for us.

Typically, lepers lived just outside of the common village area, away from people; they were considered infectious, unclean, unwanted—even unholy and unforgiven by God.

There was no more fearful diagnosis in these ancient days than to be told, “You have leprosy.”

In many ways, it a death sentence.

Swindoll, p. 410

Now the Greek term here for “leprosy” is a broad term for a wide range of skin diseases.

Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 410

Any kind of rash or skin disease would have provoked suspicion of wrongdoing; the individual would have been inspected by the local priest. If leprosy was confirmed, the individual would have been immediately put outside the village or town, away from the possibility of contact with any other member of village, including his own family.

G. Campbell Morgan, [The Great Physician](#) (Revell, 1937), p. 101

Lepers would build little huts or lean-to’s just outside the village borders, where they would live at a distance.

Adapted from R.C.H. Lenski, [The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel](#) (Augsburg Publishing, 1946), p. 874

This phrase Luke uses: they stood at a distance from Jesus, is a volume of suffering.

We know from historical records that a man with leprosy couldn’t get within 50 yards of another human being, except other lepers.

William Barclay, [The Gospel of Luke](#) (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 218

Some of the lepers might have family members designate a place where food would be left for them from time to time.

Dale Ralph Davis, [Luke](#) (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 64

Most of the time, life would move on without them. They would be forgotten over time.

So, they will spend the rest of their lives 50 yards away from life; no closer than 50 yards from their children, their spouses, their synagogue, their friends.

They were close enough to see their children playing, but not close enough to hug them or have a conversation with them. They were close enough to hear laughter from the village, but not close enough to know why or join in.

If you were to write the biography of a leper colony, you could entitle it, “Fifty Yards from Hope” or “Fifty Yards from Love” or “Fifty Yards from Life.”

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, wrote that a leper in no way differed from a corpse and the curing of a leper would be considered equal to the raising of the dead.

There was no human cure for this disease.

Lenski, p. 875

The rabbis of Jesus Christ’s day were teaching that only God could cure leprosy.

Well let me tell you, God is about to walk by. In fact, He’s just arriving.

Now, Luke’s account implies that this event is taking place near a Jewish village, near the border of Samaria. Evidently, Samaritan and Jewish lepers no longer cared what side of the rail-road tracks they came from; a leper’s friends were other lepers.

And Luke records here in **verse 12** that they’re **standing at a distance**—I’d say it was about 50 yards away.

And they’re shouting here, **“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”**

So, they know who He is, by name: Jesus. They call Him “Master” here, which was equal to Rabbi, or teacher.

Lenski, p. 875

So, they know He’s a religious leader. A teacher. But a healing teacher. They evidently know that Jesus had already healed one leper a couple of years earlier. That stunning news of Jesus’ power had raced around this region.

But that leper, Luke recorded back in chapter 5, had asked the Lord if He was willing to heal him. And Jesus had said, “Yes, I am willing”—as if to say, “Yes, I’m willing to even heal a leper.” And that leper was immediately healed.

So, these ten lepers here, some three years later, aren’t asking, “Lord, are You willing?” but “Lord, will you show us that same mercy?”

And the mood of this imperative could be expressed in our language with the word, “Please.”

J. Reiling & J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Translators Handbook on the Gospel of Luke* (UBS, 1971), p. 583

This is a pleading, crying, lamenting: “Please, please—Jesus, Master—have mercy on us, please!”

Jesus stops and responds to them with a strange command; notice **verse 14:**

*When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."*

*Luke 17:14a*

This isn't what they expected.

Back in **Luke chapter 5**, Jesus went over and touched the leper and He was healed.

Here, the Lord doesn't go over to them; He doesn't touch them; He simply says, "**Go show yourselves to the priests.**"

But that's a problem for them; they have leprosy!

They could have responded to Jesus, "We're not allowed within 50 yards of a priest; they're not going to let us walk into their office."

We know from Jewish history that priests wouldn't even buy food from a merchant if a leper had walked that same road. And besides, priests can get leprosy too. They wanted nothing to do with lepers.

But these 10 lepers here definitely understood the implication of Jesus' command: according to Mosaic law, if a person sensed that their leprosy was in remission, if they saw evidence that their skin was returning to normal, they could go to the priest for verification.

But the only reason they would ever go to a priest was if they'd sensed some improvement! And if they were indeed healed, the priest would offer special sacrifices for eight days and then pronounce them clean and reintroduce them back into society (**Leviticus 14**).

But here Jesus is commanding they go to the priests, and they are still covered with leprosy.

Nobody did that.

I can imagine these men looking at each other somewhat confused:

"Did you hear what I think I heard?"

"I think I heard it too! He is 50 yards away, but it sounded like He just told us to go the priests."

"Go to the priests? Why?"

Jesus is telling these men to exercise faith in His ability to heal them before giving them any evidence that He would.

And it's only when they obeyed His word that **verse 14** says:

*And as they went they were cleansed.*

*Luke 17:14b*

You could render it, “Only after they departed were they healed.”

After they were in the middle of obeying His word, did they benefit from the power of His word.

Don’t miss this here: they were to exercise faith in His word without seeing any evidence.

So do you, by the way.

How do you know you’re going to heaven? He said so: “**The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord**” (Romans 6:23).

How do you know He truly forgives your sins? He said so. **If you confess your sins, He’s faithful and just to forgive your sins, and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).**

So, all ten lepers stand here looking at each other, we’re not told how long they hesitated or talked it over but all of them agreed to start heading out.

We’re also not told how far down the road they go before the leprosy starts to disappear: if it slowly faded away or after two steps it completely disappeared.

What we do know is that they didn’t have any mirrors, but they could see each other!

R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume 2* (Crossway, 1998), p. 170

If we’d been there, at some point, we would’ve seen them stop and start looking at each other—down at their hands and feet—then start jumping up and down for joy, perhaps crying, hugging each other, but then running to find the nearest priest as fast as their newly healed bodies could run so they could get back to living again.

Jesus has effectively raised the dead!

They all take off—except one of them. **Verse 15:**

*Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.*

*Luke 17:15*

The original language says he began praising God with a phone (*megale*, φωνη μεγαλη) which gives us our word megaphone.

Reiling & Swellengrebel, p. 584

This is loud; this man is not holding back!

Like the woman Pastor Charles Spurgeon was witnessing to in London during his ministry in the late 1800s, as she began to understand the gospel and that Christ would forgive her and save her, she got so excited she said to Spurgeon, “If Jesus saves me, He will never hear the end of it.”

Hughes, p. 173

Well, this leper won't let Jesus hear the end of it.

**Now verse 16 says:**

*And he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks.*

*Luke 17:16a*

He's worshipping Jesus now. Earlier he was thanking God and now here He's thanking Jesus, as if to say he understands now that Jesus is much more than a Jewish Rabbi.

Jesus is worthy of worship as the empowered Messiah—God in the flesh. Only God can heal leprosy. Well, God just did.

This man's worship at the feet of Jesus is tantamount to believing in Jesus as his Divine Messiah.

Then Luke adds this little biographical phrase here at the end of **verse 16: Now he was a Samaritan.**

This implies that some or all the other nine lepers were Jewish.

It's as if Luke says, “The guy you wouldn't have expected to come back and thank Jesus was the only guy who came back.”

The other nine lepers experienced the Lord's power, but this leper came to worship the Lord's person. And—get this—this is his first act of freedom.

Adapted from Davis, p. 65

What does he do? He makes a 50-yard dash (and probably sets a new world record). I like to think of it as “A 50-yard dash to Thanksgiving!” and he falls at the feet of Jesus.

Now Jesus asks him several questions here in **verse 17**. And he asks these questions not because He needs answers, but because He wants to press home some application; this is what's actually happening here.

First and foremost, this is not only a demonstration of Messianic power, this is a demonstration of Messianic grace.

**Verse 17, the first question Jesus asks:**

*“Were not ten cleansed?”*

*Luke 17:17b*

Don't miss the obvious, all ten were cleansed.

It didn't matter if they were Jewish or Samaritan, religious or pagan, old or young, educated or illiterate, all ten had different biographies and backgrounds but the gracious power of Jesus healed all of them.

By the way, don't equate physical healing with spiritual salvation. Only one leper gets saved in this account.

By healing the sick, Jesus is validating His claim to be the Messiah, who was prophesied to heal and restore.

In fact, most of the people whom Jesus healed in the gospel accounts were unsaved when He healed them, and then they came to saving faith in Him afterward.

The same thing happens later in the Book of Acts, where the Apostles will heal multitudes of people, even those who walked across their shadow or touched their clothing (Acts 5). Again, it validated that they truly represented the Messiah and His coming Kingdom.

It was physical healing, but not necessarily spiritual healing.

And keep in mind that the physical healing of these ten lepers would be temporary; they would still die one day; but spiritual healing—salvation—will last forever.

The physical healing of all ten lepers here demonstrated the grace of the Lord.

- He didn't just heal His followers;
- He didn't just heal His friends;
- He didn't just heal leaders in the synagogue;
- He didn't just heal His Jewish kinsmen.

This was the grace of God.

**Jesus asks another question here in verse 17:**

*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?”*

Luke 17:17b

Jesus knows where they are. He's simply pointing out that ten lepers were healed, but nine of them evidently cared only about their healing and nothing about the Healer.

So again, what a demonstration of grace. If I'd been Jesus, I would've waved my hand and all nine of them would've got it back—twice as bad.

But then again, how easy is it for us to look at them and refuse to see our own ingratitude.

You ever think about the fact that if Jesus only did for us what we thanked Him for, we'd all be in trouble.

If Jesus said, "I'll do one thing for you today, and if you thank Me, I'll do another, but if you forget to thank Me, that's it for the day."

But the Psalmist writes, "He daily loads us with benefits" (Psalm 68:19); He lavishes His grace upon us (Ephesians 1:7). More than we ever see and even thank Him for when we see it.

Think about the fact that Jesus healed these ten men knowing *already* that nine of them would leave Him in their dust; they wouldn't even shout a "thank you" over their shoulder as they and ran toward the village.

They had their miracle; but they didn't want their Messiah.

Jesus knew that before healing them, but He healed them anyway.

But this one man doesn't move on with the crowd at rush hour, he stops and gives thanks and now what happens? **Verse 19:**

*And [Jesus] said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."*

Luke 17:19

Literally, ***your faith has saved you***, from *sozo* (to save).

By the way, Jesus didn't say, "Your gratitude saved you." No, "Your faith—your worship of me at my feet as your Messiah, has cleansed you from physical corruption, but now spiritual corruption as well."

**Before we leave this scene, what can we learn about this natural undertow of ingratitude?**

How can we avoid running with the majority as they rush by the Master—the Maestro—who so beautifully and skillfully blesses us and leads us and benefits us and invests in us ever single moment of the day?

How do we develop the ability to stop and applaud His divine performance on our behalf, which is another way of saying, “Thank you!”

Let me suggest two ideas:

### **Take some time to think about His grace!**

Take some time each day to look around and recognize the hand of God.

We play with our grandchildren now that game, “I Spy with my Little Eye.” I love that game because it’s free, and it doesn’t need batteries! “I spy something blue” and we begin to look for everything and anything that’s blue.

“I spy with my spiritual eye something God has created; something God gave me, something God is doing.”

Instead of racing down the road of life in a perpetual rush hour, look around at His *creation*; look into His word for *direction*.

Let His word dwell in you richly, deeply—which, Paul writes will bring to your heart a spirit of thankfulness (Colossians 3:16)

So, take time to think of what God has done for you, with you, through you and in you.

We didn’t see Him at first; we didn’t recognize Him, but He was over there playing the beautiful music of providence and grace.

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom wrote about an incident that taught her a lesson on giving thanks in everything. You may know her testimony: during World War II, she and her sister, Betsy, and her family, had been arrested by the Nazis for harboring Jews. Betsy and Corrie were taken to Ravensbrück Concentration Camp. Their barrack was incredibly crowded with women; it was unbelievably filthy and, to add to the problem, it was infested with fleas.

One morning, these sisters quietly read the Bible they’d smuggled in; they read in **1 Thessalonians 5:16** the reminder to rejoice in everything.

With that Betsy announced to her sister, “Well, we must also thank God for these fleas.” Corrie said, “There is no way I am going to thank God for fleas.” But Betsy was persuasive and the women eventually prayed and thanked God for the fleas, even though they weren’t sure why.

During the months that followed, they found that they were free to read and study the Bible, talk openly to other women about the gospel as well as conduct prayer meetings without fear of being caught. They learned later that this was unique for their barrack, because the guards wanted to avoid the fleas.

preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1998/april/2665.html

Take some time to think about His grace.

**Take some time to give thanks for His grace, His provision, His leadership, His Word and His promises.**

Resist the crowd's ingratitude—nine men were racing back to their lives; one man raced to the One who would become His life and His savior.

The world will always be too busy, too uninterested, too defiant to actually see and hear the music of God's creation and handiwork and mercy and goodness and grace.

Take some time to think; take some time to give thanks.

The news recently carried the story of an Australian man whose boat broke down; he was swept away in the current and was lost in the vast ocean. The chances of being found didn't really exist—it would be miraculous.

Months later, he was spotted by a Tuna fishing boat from Mexico and as they pulled up to him, this bone thin, weather-beaten man who'd survived off rainwater and fish, just patted his chest and began to weep and say, "Thank you! Thank you!"

He knew he'd been rescued, and he would never forget that moment.

Neither will this leper.

Neither will you and I when we remember we've been rescued forever and shepherded even now by our Lord.

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