

Grateful Faith

Spring Quarter: The Gift of Faith

Unit 3: The Fullness of Faith

Sunday school lesson for the week of May 8, 2016

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Lesson Scripture: Luke 17: 11-19

The key focus of this lesson is how people respond to Jesus. While the disciples are still struggling to understand Jesus, a rather unexpected person becomes the model for how to respond to the coming of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus

In reality, the story before us today is rather simple. Jesus is traveling through Samaria when a group of lepers call out to him for help.

Samaria lies between Galilee (the region in which Nazareth is located) and Judea (where Jerusalem is). So going through Samaria is the logical path for Jesus to go to Jerusalem.

However, this miracle before us contains a couple of levels of cultural tension. The main character is both a leper and a Samaritan. Lepers were culturally isolated, required to stay out of the main area of cities and were excluded from normal life. On the other hand, Samaritans were disliked by Jews for their religious defection and for being racial half-breeds. The notion of a Samaritan leper receiving God's help was undoubtedly shocking to many, since they had written off people in either category as being beyond help.

These 10 lepers desperately desire to be healed. The fact that they draw near to Jesus says much, since lepers were expected to isolate themselves from people. But what they know about Jesus tells them that he is approachable.

Notice these lepers address Jesus as a person with power, calling him "Master." In Luke, the title often suggest that Jesus has miraculous power (5:5, 8:24, 45; 9:33). By using this title, these lepers identify themselves as his subordinates; he is one who has power over them.

The request of these 10 lepers is also of interest, they ask for mercy or compassion. However their request is really for healing. Therefore, this healing is more than an exercise of power; it is an act of compassion.

But rather than healing these lepers immediately, Jesus tells them "to go show themselves to the priests." At this point, there is no pronouncement of healing, no contact with them and no prayer for them. They are simply told to go show themselves to the priests.

Scholars tell us that lepers were re-admitted to full community life only after they had received a clean bill of health from a priest.

Now, Jewish lepers would not need to go to Jerusalem to do this. Priests only served part of the year in the Temple. The rest of the time they would be in their hometowns. Often, they would be teachers of faith or perhaps employees of a local synagogue. In these places they would also perform duties for which a person needed a priest (such as inspecting lepers). Thus, Jesus is not requiring a lengthy trip, simply sending them to receive confirmation of their healing.

So, these 10 lepers start their trip to the priests before they are healed. Consequently, they are healed only as they are on their way. All 10 lepers had enough faith to begin the trip to the priests without having received this healing. A real plus here is that all 10 lepers acted on the faith they had.

The story continues! As they had acted on Jesus' word, suddenly they find themselves cleansed. This event definitely points to God's marvelous grace. You see, these healings allow these men to return to a normal life. All 10 lepers should have been on their knees thanking God.

The fact is, however, that only one of them stops, returns, and gives thanks to God. And he proclaims his thanks in a loud voice – he yells his thanks to God. So full of praise for God, he falls at Jesus' feet and gives Jesus thanks.

Scholars point out that we should not miss the parallel between the man thanking God and now thanking Jesus. The posture Luke describes is that of worship. He bows to the ground before Jesus, thanking him for this wonderful gift.

Then Luke surprises his hearers! He states that this one grateful leper is a Samaritan. As noted earlier, Samaritans and Jews did not get along. For one thing, Samaritans were descendants of the people who had been left behind when the nation of Israel fell in the eighth century B.C. These people then intermarried with the other native peoples of Palestine and with the Assyrians, who were brought in when the people of Israel were exiled. The Jewish people wanted nothing to do with these Samaritans who they considered to be half-breeds and vice versa.

Jesus then notes that 10 men were healed, but only one, "this foreigner," a word often meaning "pagan" or "heathen" has taken the time to stop and praise God for his work. "Where are the other nine?" Jesus asks.

So the hero of our story is an outcast. By pointing out that he is "a foreigner," Jesus is actually shaming those who had not stopped to thank God. If they are people of God, they should be the ones who honor God, but it is this outsider who gives thanks and becomes the model for how to respond to God's blessings.

Essentially, Jesus does two things here. He commends the example of gratitude in the Samaritan and he also shows that response to him is possible from those outside the nation. Sometimes those people outside the nation are actually the most sensitive to the gospel.

Jesus then issues a final encouraging commendation. He tells the grateful leper that his "faith has made him well."

Scholars explain that throughout the story, various words are used to refer to the healing. But here at the end, Luke uses a Greek word that means “saved.” Then we are informed that New Testament writers often use “saved” to speak of a healing, yet this is the first time Luke uses it in this story. Consequently, the suggestion here is that the man has received more than those who did not return to give thanks. Faith and salvation come together.

Receiving God’s Blessings

It is important to realize that all 10 of the lepers recognize the power of Jesus. Luke wants us to see them as people who believe that the power of God works through Jesus. Though we are not sure how they know about Jesus, they believe he has the power to heal. These lepers see him as the one with the authority to send away the thing that afflicts them with pain and isolation. So they ask Jesus for mercy, and Jesus’ quick response stresses that they trust him. And this trust is honored in that they are all healed.

Here’s a point to remember! This healing comes through their recognition of who Jesus is. He is the One who wields the power of God. He is the One who grants mercy, even to strangers. And He is the One who can overcome all the things that diminish our lives.

Only One was Grateful

Only one of those who is healed thanks God and returns to thank Jesus. His actions single him out as the one who knows best who Jesus is. He returns to bow before Jesus. This posture of worship suggests more than that Jesus exercises the power of God. The intimation is clearly that Jesus is an appropriate object of worship.

By contrast, when John tries to bow like this before an angel in the Book of Revelation, he is told not to do it because such adoration is only due God (Revelation 22:8, 9). And something similar happens to Cornelius in Acts when he bows before Peter. Peter advises Cornelius to quickly stand up because he is only human (Acts 10:25, 26).

But before Jesus, bowing is the appropriate thing to do. The healed man glorifies God and gives thanks to Jesus as he bows before him. As Luke clarifies, this man who is healed recognizes the presence of God in Jesus.

I repeat, this one grateful leper becomes the example of how people should respond to Jesus and the gifts they receive through him. Just as soon as he knows he is healed, this one grateful leper gives thanks to God. He knows that he owes his healing and regaining of his life to Jesus, so he makes it his priority to offer God thanks.

One more time, this grateful leper serves as an example for how we are to respond to the blessings we receive from God. Knowing that these blessings come through Christ, this leper honors Christ and glorifies God. And he knows that to glorify God means more than just an offering of our private thanks. To glorify God is to sing God’s praises in public and thereby increases His reputation of goodness among all others.

Your Faith Has Saved You

This story ends with a declaration about the grateful man's faith. We note that all 10 lepers are healed as they recognize the power of Jesus. But only this one grateful leper is said to have faith. He has the faith in Jesus that Luke wants all of us to have. His thanksgiving expresses his faith in God.

So what does that mean for us? Luke wants us to follow the grateful leper's example as we express our own faith through thanksgiving. Doing that demonstrates that we recognize our dependence on God for all good things. And by thanking God we give voice to our profound trust in the goodness of God.

As the story concludes, Jesus makes it clear that this man's faith has "saved him." His acknowledgement of dependence on God brings wholeness and healing that far surpasses any physical malady.

Summary

Not long ago, I ran across a statement that truly made me think. The author is unknown.

"The greatest blessing lacking in life is the willingness to see our blessings."

Now, that may have been true of nine of these lepers, but it wasn't true of the one grateful leper. You see, he recognized his blessing and the Source of his blessing. Therefore, he becomes our example of how we are to respond to God's goodness – both in gratitude and worship.

Action Plan:

1. Ask class members to share gratitude for blessings, including healing they have received.
2. How is the Samaritan a good role model for us?
3. Discuss the relationship you see in this story between gratitude and faith.

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