



Pentecost 18 – October 8-9-10, 2022

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: **Thank God for What We Don't Have**

1. **To see what we need** 2. **To be at peace with God**

¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^[b] met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17: 11-19)

Dear believers in Christ Jesus,

Two little words. One big meaningful phrase. We teach it to our children, so desperately wanting them to be polite and proper, but we ourselves often forget to say it. What phrase am I talking about? It's simply this: thank you. Thank you. And it's not even so much about the words, but also to genuinely have the attitude of gratitude that lies behind them. We say thank you almost without thinking to the waitress who gets us that cup of coffee. We say thank you to the stranger who holds the door open at Kwik Trip. We say thank you God in church, and sometimes we even mean it. Each week, we'd do well to count up all the good things our gracious God has given to us: our health and homes, families and friends, complete with all the blessings of salvation Jesus Christ has self-lessly earned for us. It's a good thing to gather as God's people to thank God, the giver of every good thing. But, what if we also gave God thanks for what we don't have? My, wouldn't that be different! I'm not just talking about being thankful that we don't have raging war in our streets or terminal disease in our homes. What about thanking God that we can't always get a good night sleep or that we can't always live pain-free?

But, that's not the way most people think. We tend to look at life this way: "I know I've got problems and so and so has it even worse – thank God I don't have that. That's not exactly what I'm talking about. Instead, I pray the account of Jesus healing the ten lepers helps us see that both the good things AND bad things in our lives are here for a Godly reason. In other words, God uses both to bless us in ways we can see and in even more ways we can't. So **Let's Thank God for What We Don't Have.** Because only then do we see what we really need. And then, we can be at peace with God.

In chapter 17 of Luke's Gospel, we learn what those ten lepers didn't have. They didn't have their health – obviously. And they didn't have good health care. In Bible days, either you were healthy, or you weren't. And there was nothing doctors could do to help the poor man or woman who contracted leprosy. Leprosy was a VERY painful, terminal

skin disease that was even more contagious than COVID. That's why God told His people that if someone showed even the slightest of leprosy symptoms, they needed to be cut off from the community. Immediately, and in almost every case, permanently.

Lepers automatically lost their homes. We're told the lepers in our sermon reading lived on the outside of the village, in who KNOWS what kind of housing. They lost their families: mothers lost their daughters and sons lost their fathers. They didn't have any government hospitals or social welfare network to care for them. Makes us wonder, how did any survive? Sad truth is, most didn't. Did some kind-hearted person share food from a distance? Did they resort to stealing from healthy folks just to get by? Lepers had no place in Jewish society. And they were required by Law to cry out, "Unclean" whenever anyone walked within 100 feet. Can you imagine the isolation, the loneliness, the hopelessness?

Our reading tells us those 10 lepers kept their distance when Jesus walked by. But, not so far away they couldn't recognize him. Our reading tells us the details: ***11 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^[b] met him. They stood at a distance 13 and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"*** Now what led these men to call out to Jesus? They didn't have social media or streaming news services. First, they must've heard about Jesus' miracles that had spread like wildfire: giving sight to the blind, restoring the lame, even raising the dead – pretty impressive list. Certainly, it was worth a shot to ask Jesus, this miracle worker from Galilee, to heal their leprosy. But, isn't that the reason God let them get sick in the first place? Now go along with me on this: what if those 10 men never contracted leprosy? What if, on the day Jesus entered their village, they were safe and sound playing with the kids or working at their jobs? Would they have really cried out: ***Jesus, Master, have pity on us?*** I don't think so either. They would've missed out meeting Jesus, maybe forever. But, because they were sick, their situation was so desperate, they called out to Christ.

And how did Jesus respond? Notice what he said. ***14 When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests."*** What was that all about? According to the Law, the only way for a leper to rejoin society, was to go to the priest, who functioned as the "health department" and verified the leprosy was gone. Like that ever happened – like NEVER. Imagine the disappointment of a leper going to the priest and hearing he still had leprosy! What if these lepers had been so fixated and discouraged by their terminal illness, they didn't bother to go? What if they only saw their earthly problems, that they never reached out to Jesus who was their heavenly solution?

Not these guys. These lepers trusted Jesus wasn't setting them up. And they weren't disappointed. The Bible says a real miracle happened that day: ***as they went, they were cleansed.*** Can you imagine their joy? Lepers who were as good as dead, were given a second chance, all because of Jesus. Can you imagine their relief? Can you

imagine the tearful reunions of husbands who could hold their wives again and children hugging their parents? All because God allowed them to get leprosy in the first place.

I don't imagine these lepers took much for granted, ever again. How about us? Do we? We tend to take a LOT for granted. Let me get more specific. I take a lot for granted, don't you? But, that doesn't make it right. Oh, sure, we might, (I say MIGHT), take one day a year to give thanks to God on Turkey Day, but how about the other 364 days? Too much complaining. Too busy. Too tired. Too sick. Not enough money. Don't like my lot in life. Wish I was better looking, had better grades. There's not one person in this room who hasn't thought those things. Did it ever occur to you that sometimes God takes away some of our blessings to show us what we really need? Think about that for a few moments. Because we really need to be close to Jesus, our Savior, He will never disappoint us. And that's why we can be thankful for what we don't have.

Do you remember the song: "One of these things is not like the other. Which one is it, do you know?" One of these 10 lepers was different from the rest. One of them was a Samaritan. Under normal circumstances, Jews and Samaritans didn't even associate with each other. The Jews despised the Samaritans for being half-breeds. They mocked the Samaritans for their religion that was half-Jewish, half-pagan. In the Jewish way of thinking, the Samaritans were outside God's kingdom of grace, no better than the Greeks or Romans. And Samaritans didn't have much time for Jews either. Ever have to deal with that kind of rejection?

Think what life was like for that one Samaritan leper. Not only did he have leprosy, he was outnumbered nine to one – nine Jews to one Samaritan. How many times a day, did the other lepers remind him of his status? Of course, all these men were outsiders in the kingdom of God. None of them would be allowed back in society until they were cleansed.

This Samaritan was different from the others. Sure, he was an outsider. But, he was the only one who came back to thank Jesus for healing him. But, he came back for another reason. You see, if what the Jewish lepers said was true, then this one leper wouldn't be healed. The other nine took it for granted they were part of God's chosen people. And if leper number ten was a Jew, he probably would've taken that for granted too. But, because he was different, he looked at Jesus different. He had nothing to hold on to, but Christ alone, and his work to save him. He looked at Jesus in faith alone which led him to praise God, and in the end, he had peace with God.

Dear friends, all of us because of our sins are like those lepers, outside God's kingdom forever. By Grace, God chose us in our Baptism to be included among God's family of believers. We didn't choose him. He chose us. By grace, he has kept us in saving faith all these years through Word and Sacrament. What a privileged position we hold in this world. Why, if we were to die tonight, we know we'd go to heaven, not because of who we are, but because who Jesus is: our Savior who loved us and shed all his

holy blood on the cross to pay our debt of sin in full. Thank God we don't have the guilt of our sins anymore, nor the fear of death, all because of Jesus who loves us. We have peace with God right now. And we'll have an eternity to thank him for that peace when we get to heaven. But, we can start right now. We can start by thanking him for all the people he's put in our lives who don't have it all together spiritually. We can thank God for a spouse who struggles with a bad temper, for kids who don't always respect us. We can thank God for neighbors and co-workers who could care less about going to church. We can thank God that we don't only have Christian friends and family. It's a real chance for us to help them discover the real peace we have through Jesus. Yes, thank God for what we don't have.

Thank God for what we don't have. If we had everything we wanted, maybe there'd be no room for Christ in our lives. Thank God. That's more than a catch-phrase. As the one grateful leper will tell you from Luke's Gospel, it's a way of life. Amen.