

Ten Lepers Cleansed

Keith F. Nickle

The American Church, Paris, France

Luke prefaces this story about Jesus' healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19) by reminding his readers that Jesus and the disciples were "on the way to Jerusalem" (v. 11, cf. 9:51; 13:22). He expects us to recall that the trip was undertaken and continues to be shaped by the impending threat of the cross (cf. 9:31, 44; also see 18:31-33). That perspective casts the theological presupposition against which all of the stories related in the "journey account" are to be understood; it controls this account, too.

(a) *The 'literary geography' of the account.* If you have a Bible atlas open, you may be puzzled to discover that Luke's reference to their route progressing "between Samaria and Galilee" simply does not compute. Surely they should have gotten farther than that by now (see 9:51-52, 56; 10:1, 38, etc.).

Luke was not tracing the itinerary on his 'AAA triptik' as he developed the narrative. We need to remember that the journey motif, while certainly having theological significance, is primarily a literary device which Luke used to tie together into a sequential narrative an impressive array of independent stories about Jesus in addition to those which Mark had used in his Gospel. The phrase "between Samaria and Galilee" is literary geography which provides an appropriate narrative context to introduce this story.

Scholars rightly alert us that echoes of the story of Elisha healing the Syrian general, Naaman, of leprosy (II Kings 5:10-14) helped to shape this story. Luke would expect his community to recall that Jesus had referred to that story from the Jewish scriptures in the sermon he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth to inaugurate his public ministry (4:27).

(b) *The lepers accost Jesus.* People were scared to death of leprosy in those days. They knew less about it and had less control over it than we do over AIDS today. There were detailed and complex regulations defined for protecting the community (see Leviticus 13-14).

These ten lepers knew the regulations and prohibitions, and they observed them. Isolated from participating in the social life of the village, they properly kept their distance at the entrance to the village and shouted to warn the unwary not to come too near, but also, (no law that said they could not), to solicit alms from any who were moved by religious charity or human compassion.

Still, their cry as Jesus approached, "Have mercy on us!" had a different tone than was usually there. There was the inflection of a faint glimmer of spiritual perception. They knew something of who Jesus was. When they saw him they called him by name; further, they named him "Master" (v. 13). Their imploring for alms resulted in *so much more* than a few coppers. They received instead unexpected and un hoped for cleansing and healing. One of them at least gained inclusion and solidarity right then with the end-time people sustained under the royal rule of God.

(c) *The lepers follow Jesus' directive.* Well, not exactly "right then." They all had to make their move in response to the initiative of God. When Jesus "saw" them he discerned the true cause and extent of their polluted isolation with a perceptive clarity

that far surpassed their own. But all he told them to do was to go and get themselves examined by a priest. (The religious inconsistency to the story, namely that Jesus would be so insensitive as to send a Samaritan for Levitical examination to Jewish priests instead of a Samaritan priest, or that the Samaritan would have gone without protest, is beside the point.) Jesus had not given them alms as they had hoped. Still, the only purpose in going to the priests was for them to get certified, according to Levitical regulation, that they were no longer contaminated with the dread disease, and that they were therefore eligible for restoration to full community participation.

“As they went they were cleansed” (v. 14b), which was a considerably different and far more profound “mercy” than that for which they had asked. We should note, without necessarily assigning it to Luke’s intent, that the transforming experience of cleansing “as they went” parallels the deeper theological significance of Jesus’ “going to Jerusalem” (v.11 — the two verbs are variant forms of the same verbal root).

Nor should we overlook Luke’s implied critique on any exclusive devotion to ritual observance, even for all the “right” religious reasons, that obscures accurate perception of the presence of the saving Messiah. All ten had asked for mercy, and all ten received mercy in the form of healing, which was far more than they had asked. Only one out of the ten received mercy beyond mercy.

That one out of the ten, having been seen by Jesus, “saw” the real significance of the cleansing and returned to confirm the blessing. Only he received the full extent of the mercy which Jesus was offering. The Samaritan saw with spiritual perception and, turning back, was converted and came to Jesus praising God, thereby joining those who, from the beginning, praised God for Jesus (cf. 2:13f, 20; etc.).

(d) *Solidarity of suffering and solidarity of faith.* There were ten lepers. But one of them, (the thankful one — v. 15b), was a Samaritan (v. 16b), “a foreigner” (v. 18b), not one of their own at all, not one who “belonged.” The other nine were Jews, who, ordinarily, would have avoided all contact with a despised Samaritan.

It must have been really tough to be both a Samaritan in the company of Jews and a leper. Still, the dread disease which severed them all from social intercourse with their own brought them together into a fellowship of similar suffering with one whom their religious and social prejudices would otherwise have counseled them to ostracize and avoid. Misery does indeed love company, and necessity does make for strange bedfellows.

Ten were lepers; one was additionally a Samaritan. It is another instance where those most frequently judged peripheral and even despicable by human standards are central to the saving purposes of God (see the Good Samaritan — 10:30ff; Dives and Lazarus — 16:19ff. Luke has testified previously to the precedence of a non-Jew over Jews in the perception of the presence of divine, royal power — see 7:2ff).

Nine *Jewish* lepers and one *Samaritan* leper. In extreme adversity those distinctions were no longer important. What the ten shared in common misery dissolved those considerations which would ordinarily have kept them estranged. Surprisingly, the same is true at times of extreme opportunity also — such as the opportune moment of encounter with the presence of the restoring and renewing power of God.

The Samaritan “saw” and returned to be included. That could have been true for all ten. If those nine cleansed Jews had been more sensitive to their solidarity in suffering with the Samaritan they might have learned from him and been led back by him in a solidarity of thankfulness. They and he could arrive together in high

expectation to prostrate themselves at Jesus' feet and to call him "Master" with much deeper meaning. Then they, together with the Samaritan, would have been given access to saving solidarity with God, a solidarity which was Jesus' to broker for those with gratefully perceptive faith (v. 19).

It was not that the other nine were not grateful. We may imagine them praising God all the way to the priests, and beyond. So exhilarated were they at how the encounter with Jesus had improved their health, their physical condition, their future prospects, they overlooked the far greater miracle of who Jesus was and what God was accomplishing for the entire creation through him.

The nine Jews probably did not even notice that the Samaritan was no longer with them. Restored to health and therefore once again acceptable in Jewish society, they would have been just as glad to see him gone. He was no longer their companion either in suffering or in blessing. He was, once again, one of those estranged and marginalized others — a Samaritan.

A sermon suggestion on the story follows:

We must be careful not to trivialize the story by reducing it to an instance when only one out of ten was polite enough to come back and say "Thank you." More is at stake than commending the attitude of polite gratitude for blessings and mercies received. The story is about perceptively discerning what really is taking place in such a restorative encounter. It is an instance of being touched by the creative power of the God who is bringing order out of chaos and wholeness out of all that is disgustingly defective and contaminatingly deteriorated.

God is eager to renew creation. God yearns for us to wake up to what is going on, to return to intimate trusting fellowship, and to claim common cause with God's grand and glorious restoration program.

So great is the divine zeal that God takes the initiative. God sends Jesus in whose person and preaching and activity one may clearly and unambiguously see God's saving intent in operation if one only has eyes to see, ears to hear, and an open and receptive spirit to perceive with discernment.

According to this story the odds are about nine to one that we will get it — which is a pretty optimistic, gracious, and generous estimate, when you think about it. The church would be in a lot better shape if that ratio held true.

When healing touches our lives and relationships, the story challenges us not to abbreviate our perception of grace gained, or to limit our offering of glory given, or to encompass only our glad recognition that the distortions which had troubled us before are now straightened out. Spiritual healing compels us to search for and acknowledge the Healer, and to discern the vast cosmic scope of the reclamation initiative of which our restoration is but a small part. Having found and discerned, we are to make common cause with that saving enterprise.

The Samaritan, on returning, was interrogated by Jesus (vv. 17-18). Jesus was not seeking information with those three questions. He was offering sharp criticism of the imperceptiveness of nine Israelites whose greatest hope should have been focused on longing for the coming of the Day of the Lord and the disclosure of God's royal rule.

An encounter with Jesus that both transforms one's physical and spiritual circumstance, and also evokes comprehension of who Jesus is, produces glad glory offered to God, not just for cleansing but also for Jesus and for what God is doing

through Jesus. Whereas all ten, having been touched by kingdom power, were miraculously healed of leprosy, only one — the Samaritan — had the wit to give himself over gladly to the restored rule of God thereby revealed.

"Your faith has made you well" (v. 19) refers to more than the cleansing. It encompasses the discernment of the presence of the rule of God which brought the Samaritan back in glad and joyful celebration as a Kingdom participant. "Rise" means more than "get up." It alludes to participation in resurrection life. "Go your way" could lead him to the priests, it could lead him back to the Samaritan community, it could lead him to search out the nine who were oblivious. Whichever resulted, from now on his way coincided with God's way.

Suggested Readings

A wealth of commentaries is available on the Gospel of Luke. Very thorough and detailed analysis of each verse, together with dependable if sometimes pedantic interpretation may be found in Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Anchor Bible, 2 vols. (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1981,1985).

Commentaries which are slanted more toward congregational teaching and homiletic appropriation, but have less descriptive information than Fitzmeyer include: Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*, Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox, 1990; Danker, Frederick W. *Jesus and the New Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988; Schweizer, Eduard. *The Good News According to Luke*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1984; Tiede, David L. *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988.

Some interesting theological studies which illumine major themes or aspects of the Gospel of Luke include:

Brown, Raymond E. *The Birth of the Messiah*. New York: Doubleday, 1977;
Carlston, Charles E. *The Parables of the Triple Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975;
Hare, Douglas R. A. *The Son of Man Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990;
Jervell, Jacob. *Luke and the People of God*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972;
Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sharing Possessions*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981;
Moessner, David P. *Lord of the Banquet*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989;
O'Toole, Robert F. *The Unity of Luke's Theology*. Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1984;
Perrin, Norman. *The Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977;
Talbert, Charles H. *Reading Luke*. New York: Crossroad, 1982;
Tyson, Joseph B. *The Death of Jesus in Luke-Acts*. Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1986.

Collections of stimulating essays may be found in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts*, ed. Richard J. Cassidy and Philip J. Scharper (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1983); and in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, ed. C. H. Talbert (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

For more information, see my book, *Preaching the Gospel of Luke: Proclaiming God's Royal Rule*, to be published by Westminster John Knox Press this spring.