

Lepers were outcasts in the time in which Jesus lived. Leprosy was a name given to a range of maladies from mildew in houses and on clothes to skin diseases in humans. Today we refer to leprosy as Hansen's disease – a disease of the skin. Leprosy in the time of Jesus was an isolating disease. If you had leprosy you were considered an unclean outcast. Listen to what the law in the book of Leviticus said about lepers: "The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp." I don't think any of us here today can relate to what those lepers had to endure. Can you imagine having to go through life living that way? It is sad to think that people were outcasts – literally. These lepers either lived alone outside the village or they set up their own leper colony. Either way, the message was crystal clear – you are different than the rest of us and therefore are not welcome.

Lepers would gather together near traffic ways in order to make appeals for charity. That is exactly what this group of lepers was doing when Jesus showed up on the scene. They called out to Jesus, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" As was his custom, Jesus paid attention even to the outcasts. He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Now why would Jesus say that to the lepers? What on earth does that have to do with showing them mercy?

In Leviticus there were specific laws pertaining to lepers and, in particular, who determined whether they were clean or unclean, outcast or not. In this case it was the priests:

"When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean."

So when Jesus instructed the lepers to go show themselves to the priests, it was his way of saying, "You are clean now. You are no longer outcasts. Go and confirm it with the priests." Perhaps the most amazing

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thing about this story is that the lepers, all ten of them, did just as Jesus instructed. They went to see the priests. Keep in mind that at that point none of them had been healed. It was only as they went that they were healed and made clean. The healing did not come before the act of obedience.

How much do you trust God? Do you trust him enough to do what he calls you to do, even when there are unfavorable circumstances? Think about the lepers for a second. Talk about unfavorable circumstances! They had been shunned by society and were desperately begging on the side of the road. Granted, some might say they did what Jesus told them to do because they had nothing left to lose, but I'm not so sure. I'm thinking they really had to trust Jesus. While most of us are not in the position of those lepers, we nonetheless, face adversity and difficult circumstances, and sometimes it's hard to trust God during those times. It's easy to go when God says, "Go", if times are good, but what about the difficult times? It's hard to get up and be obedient during when the chips are down.

Perhaps it's a painful divorce you have experienced. You didn't get married intending to get divorced, no one does that, but now for whatever reason the relationship is ending and it has hurt not only you and your spouse but your children and extended family and friends. Can God be trusted even in a time like that? Can we trust that God is still with us when all seems lost? Maybe instead of divorce, it's a serious illness. Can God be trusted through cancer? Can we get up and follow even as we don't know if there will be a tomorrow for us or not? If it's not a divorce or illness maybe it's financial difficulties. There are countless numbers of Americans drowning in debt living a lifestyle that is beyond their means. There are a lot of things in life that can drag us down and keep us from following Jesus. And some days it's difficult, if not impossible, to obediently go where Jesus tells us to go and do what he tells us to do without asking that question in the back of our minds, "Is this for real or not?"

The lepers believed Jesus to be real and his promises to be real, so they went to show themselves to the priests. As they went they were made well. No more leprosy! Just imagine what that must have felt like. To have lived your life with a disease that was not only physically disabling but socially disabling as well, and then to have it disappear in a split second would have been exhilarating. Freedom!

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Now we get to the really interesting part about this story. One of the lepers, a Samaritan, turned around after he realized he had been cured and went back to Jesus. The Samaritan was the only one who didn't listen. Does anyone here have trouble listening? My wife Alisha and I went to dinner at Chili's a few years ago. The restaurant was crowded and there was a long wait, so the hostess asked if we wanted to eat in the bar area. It was a non-smoking restaurant so we went ahead and took a seat in the bar. Benjamin was just a baby at the time and this was one of our first times to actually go on a date and have a conversation. Those of you with children can identify! Even five minutes of conversation is welcome. The hostess seated us and I couldn't have asked for a better seat. I was positioned perfectly to see the big screen television above the bar. In fact, the only thing between me and the game on the television was my wife! At first, I got away with it. Out of the corner of one eye I watched the football game and out of the corner of the other eye I looked at Alisha. My wife is pretty sharp so it didn't take long for her to figure out what was going on. I was "fake" listening! It's hard to concentrate on a game and carry on a conversation with your wife at the same time. Halfway through the meal she said, "Hello!" remember me? I'm your wife! I thought this was a date! I'm pathetic. The only way we could remedy the distraction of the game was for us to switch places at the table! There is no telling what Alisha said to me during the first half of the date because I wasn't listening. I have gotten a little bit better but I must confess I still don't listen near as well as I should!

The Samaritan leper was not a good listener. What did Jesus tell the ten lepers to do? He told them to go and show themselves to the priests. That was their way of gaining acceptance back into the community. But the Samaritan leper didn't listen to Jesus. The other nine, however, listened perfectly. They did just as Jesus told them and went straight to the priests. The nine lepers in this story usually get a bad rap. Among other things, they have been described as being ungrateful, but I'm not so sure that was the case. I'm sure they were grateful. How could they have not been? The problem is not that they were not grateful but that they didn't return to give praise to the one who saved them. Did you know it's possible to be grateful and ignorant at the same time?

The Samaritan leper was grateful but not ignorant. He knew full well what he should do, regardless of Jesus' original instructions. When he saw he was healed he turned back, praising God with a loud voice. It's interesting that he turned back towards Jesus because that is exactly what it

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means to repent. Perhaps in his turning back to Jesus he was not just turning back to give thanks and praise for physical healing, but spiritual healing as well. As the Samaritan (notice we just call him “Samaritan” at this point because he is no longer a leper) fell at the feet of Jesus, Jesus asked a rhetorical question, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Jesus knew the answer to his question but he asked it anyway to build up this Samaritan. It was Jesus’ way of saying, “Out of ten people you are the only one who got it.”

I was visiting with a friend of mine at lunch this week and we started talking about the difference between believing in Jesus and believing in Jesus. We talked about how all of us at some point must make the transition from believing in Jesus to believing in Jesus. In other words, are you grateful enough to throw yourself at the feet of Jesus? Are you grateful enough that when all the others are going their own way, oblivious to their Creator and Redeemer, to go against the crowd and turn back to Jesus? Are you grateful enough that when society says it’s okay to worship God whenever it’s convenient for the individual, to stand up and say, “No! I will praise my Redeemer while I have breath.” Are you grateful enough that when others say it’s a waste of time and inconvenient to go on a mission trip, to say, “No, I will serve others like Jesus told me to do.” Are you grateful enough that when others are busy and preoccupied with the concerns of this temporary world, to say, “Wait a minute, I’m going to spend some time with Jesus in prayer.” Just how grateful are you?

I think it’s interesting what Jesus told the Samaritan to do at the end of this story. He didn’t say, “Sit right here and dwell on your experience.” No, he said, “Get up and go on your way; your faith as made you well.” Get up and go on your way. That was Jesus’ way of saying, “You have experienced salvation today, so don’t just sit here praising me, get up and go on your way and share your experience with others. Get up and go on your way -- not your mother’s way or your father’s way or your best friend’s way, but your way.” Take your experience of grace and salvation in Jesus Christ and share it with the world in your own unique way. Get up and go on your way like someone who has just been set free, because whether you realize it or not, you already have been. Amen.