

Trouble in the Biblical World: Leprosy

“Jesus!” They cry in hoarse unison, “Have mercy upon us!” The plea comes from 100 yards off, the standard quarantine distance for lepers. Leprosy was a common, gruesome disease in the ancient world (mentioned the most). To get it, meant having a slow and painful death sentence placed upon one’s life. Malignant, it first started as a small bacterium which then produced whitish pigment that quickly turned into nodular lumps.

When it spread to the facial area, it rotted out the nose and throat membranes and eventually the vocal cords. Orifices would then leach out slimy ulcerations. Leprosy was insidious in that it attacked the nerve endings of the skin which meant the loss of all sensation of the infected area. Over time it became infected, deformed, and necrotic. The body retaliated against the disease with a series of self-amputations. Leprous person emitted a horrible smell, and it was not the “sublime pallet of odoriferous emanation” as Right Guard claims. Because of its highly contagious nature, victims of leprosy endured severe physical, psychological, and social, alienation. Thus, lepers had to gather in groups called colonies as one writer details:

They formed piteous groups, with clothes rent, heads bowed, hair disheveled,
and a cloth bound strangely on the lower face and upper lip.

No one could help them, so they helped themselves. No one, that is, save Jesus. He who routinely cured dreaded diseases had no problem with leprosy. At least that is what the lepers have heard (Luke 5:12-14). However, when they meet up with Jesus, he doesn’t do anything but give them an order, “Go to a priest.” This directive is right out of the leprosy handbook found in Leviticus 13-14 which details a series of health regulations to prevent the disease from becoming pandemic. When a person believed he contracted the disease, he immediately went to a priest. The priest would perform an elaborate protocol of washings, shavings, disinfections, and quarantines. If the process was effective, the priest would declare the person, “Clean” and he could get on with his life. If not, the priest declared him “Unclean” and the leper was forever ostracized from society. As a fair warning to others, he had to wear tattered clothes, leave his hair uncombed, keep his nose and mouth covered and shout, “Beware! Unclean!” This is social distancing on steroids. Now if the 10 lepers obey Jesus and go to the priest but nothing changes, they will be stoned before they reach village limits. But Jesus loves to turn spiritual mush into spiritual muscle. If you believe, go. If you don’t, rot.

Trouble In Our World: C.P.E.

In the Spring of 1990, I needed a course called C.P.E. to complete my M-Div studies. C.P.E., is essentially doing chaplain work at hospital. While on duty on day, a nurse recommended that I visit a young man who just had a kidney removed. “Why?” I asked? She answered, “A.I.D.S.”

Not unlike leprosy then, and COVID now, there was a hysteria regarding AIDS in the 80’s. No one was sure, if or not, it could be transmitted through non-sexual means, other than through blood

transfusions. So, with a little trepidation, I opened the door to my patient's room only to be engulfed by the "sweet smell of stinky weed" i.e., *cannabis*. Getting high was his way of dulling the pain, not only of the surgery, but also of having a fatal disease.

After introducing myself I began, "Sorry about your kidney?" "Yea it was full of tumors, and it won't be long until they take the other one, but I'll probably die first," he resigned. "Why do you say that?" I asked. "I got A.I.D.S and I'm not even gay," he replied with biting bitterness. "How then?" I inquired. "Dirty needles," he replied. I listened to his pain for over an hour after which, I did something considered highly risky, given everyone's ignorance about A.I.D.S. at that time. Without donning protective garb, I grabbed his hand and prayed for him. When I was finished, I hugged him. "Do you know what you just did?" he marveled. "Yea," I replied, "But God will take care of me as he will you." He looked up with tears in his eyes and said, "Thank you."

Grace In The Biblical World: 1/10 - 1/42

[SLIDE 10] The 10 lepers got nothing to lose so they listen to Jesus. As they do, a miracle unfolds before their very eyes. They look at their hands, and into each other's faces, and see the regeneration of healthy flesh and pigmentation (softer than a baby's behind). Gone are the necrotic effects of this wasting disease. They have been healed from the top of their heads to the soles of their feet. When it dawns on them, they pick up their pace to see the priest. But one does not. He reverses course to find Jesus. A few moments he does and filled with gratitude he falls at Jesus' feet and says something akin to,

You gave me back my life! I can be a husband and father again.
Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Jesus accepts his thanks but then asks three provocative questions: (1) "Were not ten made clean?" (2) "Where are the other nine?" (3) "None of them felt the need to give thanks but you?" The underlying expectation in these questions is that whoever receives a blessing from Jesus is responsible to thank Jesus. Jesus doesn't like the percentage here: 10 get healed. One give thanks. Unless you are tithing, 1 out of 10 is so sad, isn't it? Jesus asks, "Where are the other nine?" My broader question is, "Where are the other 42?" The Gospels record 43 of Jesus' miracles but this is the only time when someone goes out of their way to thank him.

Nevertheless, the heart of this passage is not about Jesus' power to heal or even his compassion to do so. It's not even about the faith/obedience of the 10 who head for confirmation of a healing they have

yet to receive. This passage is about thanksgiving and thanksgiving from an unlikely source. That source, as Luke makes clear, is a Samaritan.

Given the historical acrimony between Jews and Samaritans, he might be excused for not wanting to return and give thanks to a Jewish healer. You see, every God loving Jew hated Samaritans. Why? Because the Samaritans contaminated the Jewish bloodline by intermarrying with Gentiles. Their systematic racism caused the Jews to curse the Samaritans in the synagogue and pray that God would forbid them eternal life. It is also exemplified by the de facto statement of John 4:9, “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.”

Grace In Our World: Triple A of Thanksgiving

The term Luke uses for “thanks” here is *eucharisteo*. It means to express thanks for a free act done on your behalf and benefit. The word later became the name of the Lord’s Supper, i.e., “The Eucharistic” or “Eucharistic Cup” because Jesus “gave thanks” to his Father before partaking of it. In the example of Samaritan Leper, I see the “Triple A” of thanksgiving:

Acknowledgment: He came back, “praising God.” This kind of acknowledgement is not general but specific. It zeroes in on specifically what Jesus has done and doesn’t attribute blessings to blind random chance or luck.

Appreciation: This is a genuine, heart-felt, “Someone did something they didn’t have to do for me.” 10 lepers got healed, but only the Samaritan demonstrated a heartfelt appreciation to Jesus.

Adoration: The Samaritan not only appreciates and acknowledges but also adores Jesus for what he did. The Samaritan falls on his face worshipping Jesus and this adoration completes the thanksgiving.

“Gratitude is the grounding of all good things.” Living in the attitude of gratitude, or in perpetual thanksgiving, is not only good for us spiritually and emotionally, but as studies now show, also physically. Thankful people have less anxiety, better well-being, and actually live longer! Of course, Jesus knew this. In v17 he assures the thankful leper, “Your faith has made you well.” The word he used for “made well” is a salvation term which means that the leper got much more than physical healing, he got salvation for his soul.

Conclusion

To be “made well” let us become perpetual thanksgivers, i.e., people that thank God for every single thing, every single time, (far past a national holiday). Let’s work hard to live out the following “Thanksgiving” passages:

Ephesians 5:20 Giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Colossians 2:7 Being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

I Thessalonians 5:18 Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Can anyone say, “Thank you Jesus?”