



# *Last Days Beacon*

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## First in Ten



*By Dr. David Schnittger*

Gratitude is a rare commodity. Even our Lord, in His earthly ministry, sometimes saw people go away ungrateful. In the incident in the life of Jesus that we will be looking at in this article, we see how rare gratitude really is. In Luke 17:11-19 we read of ten lepers who were healed, yet there was only one who returned and said, "Thank you." As we move toward Thanksgiving week, it's important for us to consider this whole issue of gratitude.

I have entitled this article, "First in Ten." For you football fans, I'm sorry to disappoint you - it's not a message about football! It's about a man who was the first and, as far as we know, probably the only one of ten who returned to Jesus to thank him. We have nine long gone and a "first in ten" to return to Jesus in gratitude for healing him. As we look at these two sets of individuals, I want you to think about who you most resemble - the one who returned in humility and gratitude for what the Lord did for him, or the nine who enjoyed the blessings and forgot the Giver of blessings.

## THE LEPERS' CONDITION LUKE 17:11, 12



First of all, let's look at the lepers' condition. There are a lot of interesting features in Luke 17:11-19 that may escape us on a cursory reading, but that can help us understand some of the dynamics in this situation. Verses 11-12 describe their condition. We read, "It came about while He was on the way to Jerusalem that He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. And as He entered a certain village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him."

Notice first, that Jesus was passing *between* Samaria and Galilee. Samaria was between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. Jesus was between Samaria and Galilee, somewhere on the border, somewhere in an unnamed village that was a border town. It was an unimportant town, a place at the edge of society. To me it seems symbolic of the condition in which these lepers were living. They had been shuffled aside to a place where they weren't residents of either Samaria or Israel. People with physical infirmities, both in the time of Jesus and in our own day, tend to be shuffled to the edges of society.

Think of the treatment that lepers have always received in society. James Michener's historical novel *Hawaii* reminds us of the treatment of lepers there. They were sent to the island of Molokai where they were left to die. Lepers have always been cast aside, shuffled to the edge of society. So, these lepers lived between Samaria and Galilee.

A second feature of the lepers' condition is that they stood at a *distance*. Lepers did not come close to any other person. They had to be distant from society. Why didn't they approach Jesus? Was it a social custom not to approach a rabbi? Was it out of respect for the Lord? Or, was there another reason?

Leviticus 13:45, 46 gives instructions concerning those afflicted with this terrible, and, at that time, always fatal disease, that was so common in the Ancient Near East. "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the

infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” So here we have ten lepers, living on the edges of society, distanced from mankind because of their uncleanness.

## THE LEPERS' PETITION LUKE 17:13, 14



In this terrible condition, these ten men somehow realized that there was something special about Jesus, and so they petition Him (Luke 17:13). Their request is a very simple one. They raise their voices in a chorus saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” The text does not give their specific request, but their condition made it very obvious what they were asking for. They were asking for healing. They were asking for Jesus to cleanse them from this dread disease. But they simply said, “Have mercy on us.”

“When He saw them,” we read, “He said ‘Go and show yourselves to the priest.’ And it came about that as they were going, they were cleansed.” The root word in the Greek for “they were cleansed” is *katharizo*, which means “to cleanse” or “to heal.” We get our English word “catharsis” from the Greek word *katharizo*. Jesus answered their petition and had mercy on them. But he also gave them a command that to us, as Westerners, seems a bit unusual. He said, ‘Go to the priest.’ Why didn’t he just say, “You are healed,” and send them along?

Let’s look at Leviticus 14:2-4, where we see that Hebrews cleansed of leprosy were to go to the priest, who would inspect them and their living quarters. “The priest shall look, and if the infection of leprosy has been healed in the leper, then the priest shall give orders to take two live clean birds and cedar wood and a scarlet string and hyssop for the one who is to be cleansed” (v 4).

The priest’s function was to certify the cleansing of the leper, much as a health inspector would do today. If indeed the leprosy had gone and the leper had been cleansed, the priest was to make an offering. Being an orthodox Jew, and following the letter of the law, Jesus instructed these men to show themselves to the priest.

What follows is most significant. Luke tells us, “It came about that *as they were going*, they were cleansed.” The cleansing did not take place prior to their movement to the priest. They believed that the Messiah, Jesus, was going to have mercy on them, and as they were going to show themselves to the priest, Jesus healed them. Their action indicates a certain measure of faith on the part of these men. They received the cleansing that they had requested. They did not wait for overt evidence of

their disease's disappearance; they went convinced that Jesus was going to heal them. So, they had their petition granted. They were cleansed and healed from their leprosy.

## THE LEPERS' REACTIONS LUKE 17:15-18

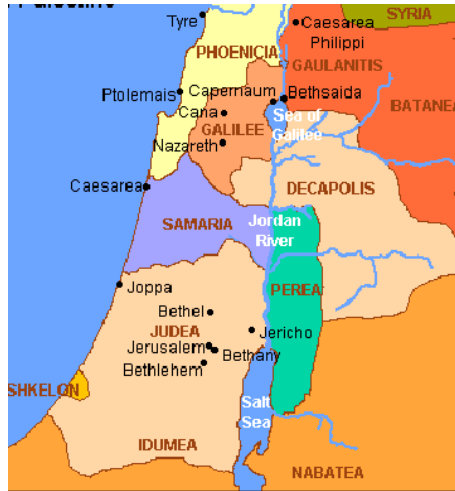


Now let us look at the lepers' response. There are two different reactions. We are given, first of all, the reaction of "the first in ten" in verses 15 and 16. "One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan."

Interesting! The only one who came back to thank Jesus was not a Jew, but a Samaritan. He was healed, but he didn't complete his journey to the priest. He immediately went back to Jesus. In doing so, he demonstrated both boldness and humility. He was glorifying God with a loud voice, probably startling others in this village, not only by his radiance and loudness of voice but by his changed appearance. God had miraculously healed him of leprosy. So, there was a boldness about the man. But he also had tremendous humility. He fell on his face at Jesus' feet giving thanks.

What is the significance of the fact that this thankful leper was a Samaritan? The Samaritans were despised by orthodox Jews, and this enmity had gone on for centuries. The enmity was created after the Assyrians conquered the northern empire of Israel in 722 B.C. The Hebrews who were left did a terrible thing for - they intermarried with Assyrians. So, the Samaritans, their descendants -- were half-breeds, outcasts by both Assyrians and Jews.

They were not totally accepted by Assyrians because they had intermarried with Jews, and they were *definitely* not accepted by Jews because they had intermarried with pagans. In addition, there were theological differences. The Samaritans had their own temple on Mount Gerizim. You'll recall that the place of worship was an issue of controversy with the woman of Sychar in Samaria (John 4), when she talked with Jesus at Jacob's well.



As a result of these differences, Jews normally had nothing to do with the heretical Samaritans. They would take the long route if they were traveling from Galilee to Judea. They would cross the Jordan River and travel on the east side of the river rather than defile themselves by walking through Samaritan territory. It was probably a result of the horrors of leprosy that these ten men, Jews and Samaritan, were ostracized together.

Here in this incident, we have a Samaritan, an outcast from Israel, and a leper on top of that. Talk about being doubly accursed! But it is this individual who comes back to the Lord Jesus. Gratitude was the reaction of the “first in ten.”

Let’s look now at the reaction of the “nine and long gone.” “Jesus answered and said, ‘Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? Was no one found to turn back and give glory to God, except this foreigner?’” (vv. 17-18). Jesus had learned that many Samaritans were eager to believe in him, and so he had a warm place in his heart for them. You may remember that the woman of Samaria, the woman who had been married five times, and was living with a man outside of marriage, was astounded that this Jewish rabbi would even speak to her, much less offer the living water. But she believed His word that He was the Messiah. So, Jesus had a warm spot in his heart for Samaritans.

You remember, too, that in the parable of the man who was robbed and beaten, the hero was a good Samaritan. Jesus loved the Samaritans, even though other Jews would have nothing to do with them. He recognized that, from a religious point of view, the healed Samaritan leper was a “foreigner.” Yet this foreigner was the “only one who turned back to give glory to God.” “Where are the nine Jews?” He was asking. “They have all the more reason to come back and recognize me as their Messiah, yet they are long gone!”

These nine, it appears, were so absorbed with their new-found health, happiness and blessing, that they did not spare a thought for the Source. They were so enamored with the gift that they lost sight of the Giver. The noted preacher Vance Havner once commented that the Apostles were taught to pray, “Give me this day my daily bread,” but all Westerners can pray is, “Give me.” We are often so infatuated with being given things that we tend to lose sight of the Giver of all good gifts.



## THE LEPER'S SALVATION LUKE 17:19



God did something very special in the heart and life of this one individual who came back. Jesus told him, ‘Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well’ (v. 19). We read in verse 14 that he had been cleansed, made totally free of leprosy. Now Jesus commends him for coming back and says to him, ‘Your faith has made you well.’ The expression of Jesus translated “made you well” in verse 19 is different from the word translated “cleansed” in verse 14. This word “made you well” is from the Greek root word *sozo*, which has the idea of “to save,” or “to rescue.” *Katharizo* in verse 14 deals with physical healing. *Sozo* in verse 19 has to do with spiritual healing. So apparently this individual who came back to Jesus exercised a different kind of faith. He didn’t just believe that Jesus would heal him; he believe that Jesus would *save* him. He responded to the Lord’s voice as well as the Lord’s blessing.

In John 10:27, 28 Jesus talked about what differentiates those who belong to Him from those who do not. “My sheep hear my voice and they follow Me. I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.” This Samaritan heard the voice of the Shepherd; he listened and he followed, and Christ gave him eternal life. This is what separated him from the nine who left to enjoy the temporal blessings that Jesus gave, but who didn’t enter His salvation.

### GRATITUDE TO CHRIST

The thankful leper illustrates the kind of response repentant sinners should have for the gift of salvation. They boldly go back, glorifying God, humbly falling on their faces before him for His blessings. As we approach this Thanksgiving season, let me ask you: Which do you resemble the most? The one who returned or the nine who did not bother?

One reason, perhaps, that we do not often demonstrate the gratitude and love toward Christ that we ought to is that we do not realize our true condition apart from Christ. If we were raised in a Christian home, if we weren’t saved out of a life of drugs or prostitution or terrible crime, we tend to think that we are okay and that maybe God obtained a bargain when he saved us. We really don’t understand how much we have been forgiven.

In Luke 7:47 Jesus articulates the principle, “. . .to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.” The question is, have we been forgiven little or forgiven much? We have to turn to the Scriptures to get an accurate answer.

The apostle Paul takes the blinders off us, so to speak, in Ephesians 2, giving us a realistic picture of our condition, our natures, our alienation from God, before Christ saved us. We read in Ephesians 2:1-3: “You [gentile Ephesians] were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too [the Jews] all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath.” Are you beginning to feel a little *unclean*?

Paul goes on, in verses 11-22, to talk specifically about the condition of the Gentiles before they came to Christ: “Therefore, remember, that formerly you [the Ephesian gentile church], once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision,’ which is performed in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

Are you beginning to feel a little *distant* from God and God’s people? A little leprous? That was the state of Gentiles before Christ tore down the wall of partition (v 14) that separated Jew and Gentile. “But now in Christ Jesus you were formerly far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ’ (Eph 2:14).

All of us, apart from Christ, had a fatal condition, much like the Samaritan—the fatal condition of sin. We were under the wrath of God and we were separated, far off from God and God’s ancient people Israel. We were all like the Samaritan leper before Jesus came into our life! But now, all of that has been corrected. We have been made alive and brought near to God by the blood of Jesus Christ. So, all of us, regardless of our parentage or our upbringing, need to recognize that God has forgiven us much.

When we recognize that, we will be deeply grateful, like the Samaritan leper. Gratitude to Christ for His saving work in our lives is as natural to the regenerated soul as the first breath is to a newborn baby. I believe, based on this passage concerning the Samaritan leper, that gratitude to Christ is the *first* evidence of salvation! The idea of an *ungrateful Christian* is a contradiction in terms.

As we approach this Thanksgiving season, which of these lepers do you most resemble? The nine lepers who were long gone after their healing, or the one leper who returned in humble gratitude for Christ’s mercy? Regardless of what is going on in our country and in our world in these last days, we can live each day in sweet fellowship with our Lord and in constant gratitude for the fact that He has “. . . blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3).

M. Craig Barnes wrote, “I have decided that gratitude is about the best measure of spirituality. It is not possible to have truly heard God’s Word proclaiming that we are new creations, or to have communed with God as beloved sons and daughters, and not be overwhelmed with gratitude.”

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