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HOW TO RESPOND TO GOD'S BLESSINGS

Luke 17:11-19

By

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Luke Lesson 79

How to Respond to God's Blessings Luke 17:11-19

A story is told of a man who was lost in the woods. Later, in describing the experience, he told how frightened he was and how he had even finally knelt and prayed. Someone asked, "Did God answer your prayer?" "Oh, no," the man replied. "Before God had a chance, a guide came along and showed me the way out."

Like that man, many people are blind to the many blessings that God daily showers upon them. They awake to see the sun shining, and do not give thanks to God. They hear the birds chirping and see beautiful flowers and trees, but they don't give it a moment's thought that God has given those blessings and given them the senses to enjoy them. They grumble about having to eat the same old cereal, forgetting that many would gladly exchange places with them and eat *anything* for breakfast. They complain about their jobs, forgetting that many would be grateful just to have a job or even to have the bodily strength to go to work. They complain about their lack of money, forgetting that they spend more on entertainment each month than many around the world earn as their total income.

Whether you are a believer in Jesus Christ or a person who does not even believe in God, the fact is, God has blessed you far more than you realize and far more than you deserve. It is important to understand how to respond properly to God's abundant blessings. To be oblivious to the fact that God is blessing you or, even worse, to take credit for His blessings as if you earned them by your own efforts, would be to slight God. The only proper response is to glorify Him from a thankful heart. These two responses, the proper and improper, are illustrated for us in this story of Jesus cleansing the ten lepers. Only one of the ten responded properly. He teaches us that ...

We should respond to God's blessings by
glorifying Him at Jesus' feet from thankful hearts.

Luke again picks up the journey motif, of Jesus proceeding toward Jerusalem where He will meet with His appointed destiny. He is traveling somewhere along the border between Samaria and Galilee, where He enters a village and encounters ten leprosy men. According to the Law, they keep their distance but they recognize Jesus and cry out to Him for mercy. Rather than drawing near and touching them, as He did with the leper in Luke 5:13, Jesus simply instructs them to go and show themselves to the priests. There would be no point in such action unless they were cleansed of their leprosy, and yet at this point they were not cleansed. They had to act with obedient faith. As they were going, they were cleansed.

But only one of the ten, a Samaritan, turns back to glorify God and give thanks to Jesus for His great mercy and power. The strong implication is that the other nine were Jews. Luke seems to put this here to show the increasing rejection of Jesus by the nation Israel, whereas this foreigner receives not only healing, but also salvation. Thus he is showing that the way of salvation is open to all who call upon the Lord, but that many who have received temporal benefits from the Lord are in danger of missing that which they most need, namely, salvation of their souls. I point out four lessons from this story:

1. We all should see ourselves as these lepers were: unclean before God and men.

Let me review some things from our lesson in Luke 5:12-16 concerning leprosy. In the Bible, leprosy is a dreaded disease that is a picture of sin. This is alluded to in our text by the fact that the lepers are *cleansed* (17:14, 17). Leprosy rendered a man ceremonially defiled, so that if he was healed, he still had to go to the priest and carry out an extensive ritual of cleansing before he could be accepted back into the religious community and worship (Lev. 14).

In the Bible "leprosy" can refer to a number of skin diseases, but in its worst form, it was what we know as Hansen's disease (R. K. Harrison, *The New Testament Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown [Zondervan], 2:463-466). This awful disease takes two forms (according to R. H. Pousma, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Merrill Tenney [Zondervan], 2:138-139). Both start with either a white or pink discoloration of a patch of skin. The more benign form is limited to this skin discoloration

in a number of places, and even untreated cases heal in from one to three years.

William Barclay (*The Daily Study Bible: Matthew* [Westminster Press], 1:295) describes the hideous progression of the worse form of this disease:

It might begin with little nodules which go on to ulcerate. The ulcers develop a foul discharge; the eyebrows fall out; the eyes become staring; the vocal chords become ulcerated, and the voice becomes hoarse, and the breath wheezes. The hands and feet always ulcerate. Slowly the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of that kind of leprosy is nine years, and it ends in mental decay, coma and ultimately death.

Leprosy might begin with the loss of all sensation in some part of the body; the nerve trunks are affected; the muscles waste away; the tendons contract until the hands are like claws. There follows ulceration of the hands and feet. Then comes the progressive loss of fingers and toes, until in the end a whole hand or a whole foot may drop off. The duration of that kind of leprosy is anything from twenty to thirty years. It is a kind of terrible progressive death in which a man dies by inches.

While the physical disease was horrible, the terrible social consequences in ancient Israel only added to the misery. According to Josephus, lepers were treated "as if they were, in effect, dead men" (cited by Barclay). The Mosaic Law prescribed that the person be cut off from society, including his family. He had to wear torn clothing, have his head uncovered, cover his lips and shout "Unclean! Unclean!" wherever he went to warn others to keep their distance (Lev. 13:45).

Jesus encounters ten such wretched men who had banded together. If the nine were Jews, their common tragedy had broken down the traditional separation between the Jews and the half-breed Samaritans, who were considered as Gentiles. They were all outcasts, separated from the common worship and separated from their own people, seemingly under God's curse.

Now, here's the kicker: The Bible wants all of us to see ourselves in our natural state before Christ as spiritual lepers in His sight. God wants us all to see that our hearts are deceitful and desperately sick (Jer. 17:9), sick with sin, unclean before the holy God. Furthermore, just as this awful disease of leprosy separated the leper from the community, so sin causes distance and rupture in human relationships, often among family members. Just as only God could heal this dreaded disease, so only God can heal and cleanse the human heart from the awful disease of sin.

The proud refusal to acknowledge our true condition as spiritual lepers is one of the main reasons people do not receive God's salvation in Jesus Christ. We all are prone to say, "I may have my faults—after all, I'm only human—but I'm not a terrible sinner. I'm a basically good person." That's what the Pharisees said about themselves, and they missed God's Savior. Indeed, who needs a Savior, if you're a basically good person? That's what the lukewarm church at Laodicea thought about themselves: "We are rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17). To think that you are basically okay in God's sight is a sure-fire way to receive nothing from Him. If these lepers had thought, "We may be sick, but we're not all that bad," they wouldn't have cried out to Jesus for mercy. They knew that they were goners unless God in His power had mercy on them. The first step to receiving God's blessings is to acknowledge your desperate condition before Him. That sense of need leads to the second step:

2. We all should do as these lepers did: call out to Jesus the Master for mercy.

Among other things, leprosy attacked the vocal chords so that these men probably could only make a raspy sound. But that didn't stop them from raising their voices and crying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" The gracious Lord Jesus will never turn a deaf ear to a cry like that!

These men knew Jesus by name, but they also called Him Master, acknowledging His authority. Luke is the only gospel to use this word in addressing Jesus, and every other time it is used by the disciples. In uttering this cry, these lepers take their proper place under the Lord Jesus' sovereign authority. We must put Him in His proper place as Lord and Master when we come to Him.

The lepers pleaded, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Mercy, like grace, is God's undeserved favor. Grace is getting what we do not deserve; mercy is not getting what we do deserve. Mercy also contains the thought of compassion in view of the sufferer's pitiable condition. By crying out for mercy, these men were acknowledging that they did not deserve healing. They weren't claiming, "We're lepers, but we're pretty good lepers. We think we're worthy of being healed." They knew that there was nothing in themselves to earn healing or to commend them above others. This is the only way that we can come to God for deliverance from the leprosy of sin, to acknowledge that we deserve God's wrath, but to appeal to His great mercy.

The good news is that God delights to show mercy to those who cry out for it! He is "abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:12-13). When Moses asked to see God's glory, the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exod. 34:6-7). His holiness demands that He judge sin, but His mercy is the predominant and leading attribute. Whatever your need, call out to the Lord. He is full of mercy.

3. We all should respond as these lepers responded: with obedient faith.

When Jesus healed the leper in Luke 5:13, He first healed him and then instructed him to go and show himself to the priest. But here, without any evidence of healing, Jesus commands these ten lepers to go and show themselves to the priests. In this, their situation was similar to that of Naaman the Syrian, whom Elisha told to go and bathe in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:10-15). It was a test of faith for them to go without any evidence of healing.

We are not told whether the ten lepers had a debate about whether or not to go. I can well imagine one of them arguing, "We'll look like fools if we show up before the priest in our present condition!" Another countered, "Yes, but we've got nothing to

lose; this is our only hope." "But it hurts to walk on these leprous feet!" "I know, but if we do what He says, maybe we'll be healed." "But this isn't the way He healed the other lepers. Why doesn't He heal us in the same way?" "I don't know, but we must obey."

Maybe they didn't have any such debate, since the text doesn't record any, but at any rate, it says, "as they were going, they were cleansed." I don't know if it happened to all of them at the same instant, or if first one and then another got healed. But, suddenly by the Lord's power, they all were restored to perfect health. If they had lost fingers and toes, they were restored. All of the devastating effects of this terrible disease were erased. It must have been a marvelous experience!

As I'll argue in a moment, I believe that only the man who returned to give thanks to Jesus was saved spiritually. But, in spite of that, the cleansing of these lepers pictures what God does to the souls of those who call out to Him for salvation. He instantly cleanses us from all our sins. He clothes us with the perfect righteousness of Jesus. He restores and heals our souls.

The only condition to receive God's healing for our leprous souls is that we take Him at His word, that whoever believes in His Son Jesus will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Just as these lepers did not first try to clean up and make themselves presentable, so we are to come to Jesus just as we are. Just as these lepers did not just believe intellectually, but had a faith that obeyed Jesus' word, so we must exercise personal obedient faith in Him with regard to His promise to save us from our sins.

But even though in one sense all ten lepers illustrate saving faith, in that they took Jesus at His word and acted upon it personally, in another sense the nine fell short of saving faith. The nine got what they wanted from God in terms of healed bodies, but they went no farther. They never returned to Jesus to receive salvation of their souls. They received the temporal benefit of healed bodies, but it is only to the one thankful leper who returned that our Lord proclaimed, "Your faith has saved you" [literal, 17:19]. In the same way, it is possible to receive special blessings from God in answer to prayer, such as a healing from a serious illness, and yet to fall short of the best blessing of all. Thus when we realize that God

has blessed us with some temporal blessing, we must not become satisfied with that and stop there.

4. We all should respond as the one leper did: glorify God at the feet of Jesus with thankful hearts.

The thankful leper represents the full fruit of saving faith, namely, lips that give joyful thanks to His name. The fact that this man was a Samaritan shows that the way of salvation is open to all who will call upon the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus calls him a foreigner (only occurrence of this word in the NT), a word that was on the signs prohibiting foreigners from passing the inner barrier of the temple (Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.11.5, §417; *Jewish War* 5.5.2. §194; 6.2.4 §§124-126). Paul tells us that Christ broke down that barrier of the dividing wall, so that we who formerly were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel now “have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Eph. 2:11-14).

Note that this leper’s praise was heartfelt: he glorified God “with a loud voice” (17:15). If before his voice had been hampered by leprosy, it was freed up now and he exercised it with full force! Others may have been embarrassed by his exuberance, but he didn’t care! Jesus had healed him and he was going to make it known! This leper’s glad praise should be that of every person whose heart has been healed by Jesus’ mighty power.

**Glorify God*—Twice it is mentioned that the man glorified God (17:15, 18). To glorify God is to extol His attributes and His actions. It is to exalt Him, to let others know how great He is. As the Puritans rightly stated, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever on account of His blessings of salvation toward us who deserved His judgment.

Spurgeon points out that while ten men prayed, only one praised. He says that even so, there are far more who are prone to pray in a time of need than to praise God when He meets that need. Oswald Chambers observed, “The great difficulty spiritually is to concentrate on God, and it is His blessings that make it difficult. Troubles nearly always make us look to God; His blessings are apt to make us look elsewhere” (*My Utmost for His Highest*, Jan. 22nd). If the Lord has delivered our souls from judgment, we ought to let others know about it.

I have to remind myself that “Praise the Lord” is not just a slogan or something nice to do; it is a command. If my life is not marked by frequent praise to God for His many blessings, I am not being obedient. While prayer will last for this life only, praise will continue throughout eternity. Those who have experienced Jesus’ cleansing power should glorify Him.

**At Jesus’ feet*—Whereas before the man had to keep his distance from Jesus because of his disease, now he comes up near to Him and falls on his face at Jesus’ feet. I doubt if he understood the deity of Jesus, but nonetheless, he took the proper place of worship at Jesus’ feet. Jesus said, “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23). We cannot properly glorify God if we do not fall in adoration at Jesus’ feet. He is the eternal God who willingly left the glory of heaven to come to this sinful earth and suffer and die for us. We must spend much time at His feet.

The man’s position on his face at Jesus’ feet also shows the proper attitude of humility that should characterize those who have been healed by His mercy. We owe everything to Him and can claim nothing as coming from ourselves. This leper wasn’t maintaining his dignity and self-esteem. He wasn’t claiming, “Jesus did His part, but I did my part.” He knew that he had been healed totally because of Jesus’ mercy, and so he readily fell on his face at Jesus’ feet. That’s where every saved person should camp out!

**With thankful hearts*—The leper was “giving thanks to Him” (17:16). The Masai tribe in West Africa has an unusual way of saying thank you: They bow, put their forehead on the ground, and say, “My head is in the dirt.” Another African tribe expresses gratitude by sitting for a long time in front of the hut of the person who did the favor and saying, literally, “I sit on the ground before you.” (In *Leadership Journal* [Winter, 1993], p. 48.) These Africans understand what thanksgiving is and why it’s difficult for us: at its core, thanksgiving is an act of humility. It acknowledges our debt to the other person.

Clearly, Jesus was pleased with his expression of thanks and grieved at the absence of the other nine (17:17-18). Hebrews 13:15-16 states, “Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks

to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased." Every day we should be filled with gratitude for all that the Savior did for us when we were spiritual lepers before Him.

Conclusion

Thirteen years before his conversion, John Wesley had a conversation late one night with the porter of his college that deeply impressed him and convinced him that there was more to Christianity than as yet he had found. Wesley discovered that the man had only one coat and that nothing had passed his lips that day, except a drink of water, and yet his heart was full of gratitude to God. Wesley said, "You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat, and no bed to lie upon. What else do you thank him for?" "I thank him," answered the porter, "that He has given me my life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him" (in A. Skevington Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze* [Eerdmans], p. 100).

Even so, if we who have known Jesus' healing power in our souls will live each day to glorify Him with thankful hearts, others will be drawn to the Savior to find mercy for their souls. Let's all learn from this exuberant and thankful leper how to respond to God's blessings, especially to the blessing of salvation. We should join him in glorifying God at the feet of Jesus with thankful hearts.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the implications for witnessing: The refusal to see ourselves as spiritual lepers is a major hindrance to salvation.
2. Many professing Christians use God to meet their needs, but they don't live to glorify Him. Discuss the difference.
3. What is the difference between intellectual faith and obedient faith? Why does one not save and the other does save?
4. How can a habitual grumbler learn to be a person of praise?

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