

# The Ten Lepers

by Todd Atkinson

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*This sermon focuses on the story of the ten lepers in Luke chapter 17, highlighting the importance of responding to God's mercy with gratitude and worship. It emphasizes the transformation that occurs when we move from a place of distance to intimacy with Jesus, showcasing the power of faith and appropriate responses to God's love and kindness.*

**Scripture:** Luke 17:11, Psalm 100:4, James 4:8, Colossians 3:17, Ephesians 5:20

**Topics:** "Gratitude", "Transformation through Faith"

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## Description

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## Transcript

I just took four days to start the new year off. I took Rob and Stephen with me. And just had the most wonderful four days of prayer.

And in that time, just felt like I had an enormous, wonderful feast of Holy Scripture. The Lord was just so good to me. And it almost felt like one of those meals that was more than I could take in.

And so I'm just overjoyed to be able to bring you a bit of some of the things that he's speaking and feeding me on, and to be able to bring some of that to you today. Let's take a look at this story from Luke chapter 17. The story begins by saying that Jesus, do we keep it up there? Was passing along between Samaria and Galilee.

These words may seem like a minor detail now, but as the story progresses, they are going to take on a greater and greater importance. And as Jesus entered a village in this region, he was met by ten lepers. Now leprosy, of course, was and still is in the world a very, very sad disease.

It's a wasting disease that destroys the flesh and can result in a horrible disfiguration. And it's contagious through touch. Therefore, Jewish law required that anybody who had become leprous, that they would have to cut off all normal contact with healthy people, people who did not have leprosy.

And so that's why these lepers, it says that they stood at a distance. They weren't allowed to approach people. It's why they said they had to call aloud with their voices, that in order for them to be heard, they had to be loud.

And so they call aloud to Jesus the most wonderful words. Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us. Three very important things.

First of all, they call him Jesus. They call him by his first name. So somehow these lepers instinctively understand Jesus' approachability.

They know that they're going to receive a warm welcome. Whether they know this because they have seen the way he's treated other people, whether they know of this by second-hand knowledge because other people have relayed this to them, they somehow know that he places the same value on everyone, and that despite their leprosy, he won't stay away from them, or that their needs don't matter any less to him, that he will intervene in their lives every bit as much as anybody else's life. And so they approach him on a first-name basis, Jesus.

Secondly, they call him Master. They realize that he is a man of spiritual authority, a man of importance, a man who can make a difference in their lives. And then thirdly, they say, have mercy on us.

However they come by this understanding, we're unsure, but they know that he has a profoundly deep, compassionate nature. He doesn't just pass by people in need. When people in need are calling his name, it will register with him.

It will mean something to him. Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us. And so he does have mercy on these men.

He literally showers them with mercy, and they have a divine encounter like never before in their lives. And it looks like this. He simply says to them, go and show yourselves to the priests.

According to Jewish law, if you felt that you were healed of leprosy, the first thing you were required to do was to go to the priest, and they would verify whether you had actually been healed or not. You weren't allowed to verify that for yourself, because if you thought you were healed but you weren't healed, you would still be spreading leprosy everywhere you go. However, you would normally only go to the priest if first the evidence of healing showed itself in your body.

If you were absolutely sure that you had been healed, you had some reason to believe that you had been healed, then you would go to the priest. Curiously, in this instance, they haven't seen any change in their body. They have nothing to go on but the words of Jesus, who said, go, show yourselves to the priests.

And without having witnessed any change of healing in their bodies, they went. And the Bible says, as they went, they were healed. What a profound thought.

As they went, they were healed. As they obeyed Jesus, the desires of their heart, they were healed. As they surrendered their own will to his will, they were healed.

As they trusted something they did not understand, they were healed. As they did something that seemed absolutely outlandish at the time, they were healed. As they dared to believe that Jesus knew what he was doing, they were healed.

And unfortunately, how far away I can be from that at times. I want Jesus to do something miraculous for me, but sometimes I want him to do it miraculous, but in my way. A way that feels comfortable to me.

Maybe a way that feels familiar to me. I want Jesus to act in my life now in a similar way to the way he's acted in the past. A kind of pattern has formed.

Don't deviate from that, Jesus. This is what makes me feel comfortable. I want him to do miraculous, but I want him to do it in a way that seems acceptable to me.

And if I had been one of those ten lepers, having seen no change whatsoever in my body, would I have obeyed? Go and show the priest. I know at bare minimum, I would have been plagued by internal questions. Well, what happens if I get there and nothing's happened? Lord, this isn't the way things work.

Lord, you're supposed to see signs of healing, and then you go. There's a backwardness to this. At least in my mind, I would have found some difficulty with this.

But not with the ten. They were so desperate for healing, and so grateful that someone was going to show them the mercy of heaven, that when Jesus said to them, Go and do this, that they went without hesitation, and they went without reservation. And as they went, they were healed.

The Bible goes on to say, One of them, when he saw that he was healed, notice, there was nothing to see until after he'd obeyed. And after he'd obeyed, the facts start to catch up with things. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, he turned back.

He turned around. This was the single biggest moment of this man's life. And because of that, there was no way whatsoever that he could just go on like before.

There's no sense of business as usual with this man. Never before in his life, had he ever witnessed such an act of power, let alone in his own body. Never before had he been shown such love and such mercy, and never before had this man ever been given a new lease on life.

And he is not going to waste this moment. And so he turns around, and you can hear him coming. Because it says he's praising God.

And he's not doing it quietly. He's praising God with a loud voice. It doesn't seem right for him to be quiet about something that was done for him.

So he responds in a loud voice, the Scripture says. Interesting, the original Greek word for loud here is the word megas. It means great or large, and it's the word from which we get mega.

So if someone has a burger chain, whatever their biggest burger is, they're probably going to call it the mega burger. Or the biggest dinosaur is going to have the word mega in front of it. It's a word that is commonly used, and that's used actually here in this ancient text.

He's on his way back to Jesus. He's turned around. He's praising God in a mega voice, a loud voice, a huge voice.

Something was done for him that was so huge that he feels the need to respond to God in an equally huge way. Do you know that that's actually one of the greatest messages of this story? There's a couple. One of them is that when you stand in great need of mercy and you call upon Jesus, there's one that wants to

show you mercy.

But the other theme in this text is when mercy is shown to me, what does my response to mercy look like? When God acts toward me? When God does something for me? Is my response minor or is it mega? Is it small or is it large? Do I know how to respond to grace when God's grace and mercy and love is shown to me anyway? Do I respond in an appropriate way? Well, one of these 10 did. It continues to say, it says, he fell on his face at Jesus' feet. Here's a guy who comes now in humility.

He falls at Jesus' feet. I love the way that even his body is employed. He literally just kind of falls in a crumple at Jesus' feet because up to this point, his entire body had been taken over and ravaged by leprosy.

He did not have control of his own body or the future of his body. And now he's so healed that now he wants his body to be as given over to Jesus as it was given over to leprosy. See how his response to God, this man kind of instinctively knows, I was ruled by leprosy.

It was destroying my life. My body was not my own. And now what worship looks like for him is that even his body would be given over to Jesus.

And so he just falls in his face in humility and surrender. And he cannot stop giving Jesus thanks. Thank you, thank you.

That's all he can say, thank you. Thank you. All I did was ask for mercy.

I have no idea that this much good could come out of such a little prayer. Thank you, thank you. Thank you for what you've done for me.

And then the scripture has this phrase, now he was a Samaritan. What in the world does it mean by that? Well, quite a lot actually. Because the Samaritans were a group of people who were absolutely despised, even hated by the Jewish nation.

They were thought of as greatly inferior. Why? Because 700 years earlier, when the Jewish nation was taken by exile into another land, when they were released back to their homeland, some Jews decided it was better to just stay in Assyria. Not to be uprooted.

They had built houses, they'd grown crops. They had intermarried with the Assyrians, and even their religion became strangely intermingled with pagan religion. And so they stayed there in a land of exile and did not want to go home.

They became an actual new people group, a new ethnic group called the Samaritans. And because of this, the Jews always hated and despised them, because they were looked at as compromisers. The rest of us tried to keep pure during our years of exile.

But you didn't, and we tried to keep our theology pure, but yours has become diluted and cloudy, your understanding of God. They were looked at as an impure people, and they wanted nothing to do with them. And so when it says, now he was a Samaritan, it means this is the unlikely one.

He's the one that nobody thought would get it right. The one that used to have mixed up theology, the one who used to mix it up with the world in all the wrong ways, until he encountered Jesus. Now, he was a Samaritan.

They did not expect that this guy, of all the guys, would become the example of what Christian worship could really look like. I love it when the Lord does that. When he just chooses a really unlikely person, and he does something so profound in them, that they become an example of what true Christian faith and worship really looks like.

And the rest of us, who have known him for a long time, have to look at that and go, oh, I think I've lost my way a little bit. When this man, as he stands to his feet, Jesus asks them, were not ten clenched? Where are the nine? If that was me, I don't think it would have occurred to me to ask the question, because maybe my expectations are low. One out of ten seems like not a bad batting average.

I think all my attention would be, I'm just really glad one guy heard this, or turned around and did the right thing. But not so with Jesus. He actually doesn't just gloss over the nine.

He speaks to it because he's grieved by it. Where are the nine? And the reason he's grieved by it is that the other nine aren't Samaritans, they're Jews. People who prided themselves on their spiritual maturity.

They prided themselves on this great, illustrious history of God that they've enjoyed. People who felt spiritually superior to the other nations. And yet now they only want God for the gifts he can give them.

Would you please heal us? He healed them, and not even so much as a thank you. Not even a thank you. The nine, their lives were changed, transformed every bit as much as the one Samaritan, and there's not even so much as a thank you.

In our generation, we would call that strong entitlement. They felt they were entitled to something from the Messiah. They're entitled, but for something from God.

Of course he's going to heal us. We're Jews. We're spiritually mature.

And yet Jesus draws attention to them. Where were the nine? When I read this story, I would really love it if the person I most identified with was the Samaritan. There's a reason I've been wrestling over the passage for a month, and it's not because he's the guy that I most see myself in.

No, no. He's the guy that I want to be like. Why? Because one touch from God, and it produces, look at it, it says he turned around.

That's repentance. He turned. He couldn't keep going one way.

One touch from God, and he just had to run one toward him. And he's just so full of worship, and he believes that God just deserves the biggest possible response that he can muster. He's humble, and humility is always a sweet-smelling aroma to God.

And he just falls at his feet and surrenders, and thank you, thank you, thank you. He's everything I want to be. Because this man received one touch from God and could not stop worshipping.

I have received hundreds, thousands. Without exaggeration, I would guess tens of thousands. Tens of thousands of times I have been spoken to by God.

I have been touched by God. I have been shown kindness by God. I have been shown mercy.

I have been forgiven of my sins. And if one touch from Jesus could produce that level of worship in somebody. It speaks to me.

We've been touched thousands upon thousands upon thousands of times. I think I understand a little bit what's going on in this story. I don't know if you've studied the book on the love languages.

People who have done pre-marriage counseling often are given a book called The Five Love Languages. You know the love languages? You've heard of them? Different ways of expressing love. Touch, acts of service, affection, words of affirmation.

And one of them is gift giving. I don't think it's a complete list because steak isn't mentioned. So when my family make a steak for me, I always tell them, steak is my love language.

I wanted to write the author of the book at some point just pointing out kindly that he should possibly add one to his list. And maybe there's one that you would add to his list. I think he's missed a few significant ones.

But I'm a gift giver by nature. I love giving gifts. It's my love language.

It's the way I show love for people. And if I haven't given you a gift, it's only because I can't afford to buy a gift for everybody. And I'm trying to curb this area of my life that can become quite excessive.

But honestly, in my heart, I love giving gifts. But over the years, I've had to train myself because I think that the person who receives my gift is automatically going to be as excited as me who's giving the gift. And so I don't just buy anything.

I study somebody. And I'm going to find out what they're like, what they enjoy, and I'm going to see if I can find the absolute best one. And I'm going to try to give it to them in the absolute most thoughtful way.

And so many times, I've come with this amazing gift to someone. I'm going to give you this gift. And what I didn't understand is not everybody is a gift giver.

And so though it's my love language, who knew it's not everybody's? And so at times, I've given this enormous gift to someone, and they're like, oh, thanks, that's nice. And just kind of put it aside because there's so much excitement in my heart and not quite as to give it and not quite as much excitement for them to receive it because who knew not everybody in the world is a gift giver and not everybody should be. But when Jesus gives you a gift, it's probably worth being thankful for.

It's probably really important not just put it aside. Even if gift giving is not normally your thing, when the Son of God gives you a gift, make sure that your response is not muted. Make sure it's loud.

Make sure it's large. Make sure it's mega. Because otherwise, we may, more than we realize, bought into a spirit of entitlement that is strong in our culture, and it may have seeped into the church, and it may have affected you and me more than we realize.

The sign that entitlement is not at work is the level of your thanksgiving. Nobody owed it to you. They just gave it to you.

He didn't owe me. He just gave it to me. And the sign that I am not engaged in the spirit of entitlement is how big my response is, how thankful my heart is.

It's the worship that pours freely from me. As freely from me as He gave me that gift. And so for weeks I went around just thinking I am like the leper.

And I have had times of my life where I felt leprous. I felt like I don't know how life is ever going to get better. You ever had really broken periods of life? Where you think, I don't know how life could get better.

I feel really awkward around people. I feel isolated. I feel a bit despairing.

You ever had times of life where you felt like that leper? I have. And then Jesus. This morning very early, long before my alarm, the Lord came to me in the most wonderful way.

His presence was so electrified I couldn't sleep. So I just had to get up. It was literally like coursing through my body like electricity.

The love of God this morning. And so I got up and I went to my office, pulled out my journal and my pen and I wrote thinking, I've known years in the past where I got up equally early but it was because I was so worried about something. It's because of the burdens of work, the burdens of ministry.

Well I didn't get up because I felt so jolly loved by God. I've got all kinds of times in my life I couldn't sleep properly at night. How did I, I'm journaling, how did I get to this point where the reason I can't sleep now is because I'm so filled with the love of God.

I am the leper. I am the Samaritan that was healed. I am the guy that God showed mercy to and I can't stop praising him in the most mega voice I have.

And long after this service and long after this day and long after this week and this year, the praise and the thanksgiving will continue to roll off my tongue and to roll out of my heart. So really, watch the story. What is this a story about? Ten people come to God, all loved by God.

They all have the same disease. They all call for mercy and guess what? They all receive the exact same miracle. So what's the story about? One that knows how to seize the moment and to respond to Jesus in a wonderful way and nine that don't get it.

But it's the response to God in an appropriate way that makes all the difference. There's language in the story here, a language of proximity. When the story begins, it says they stood at a distance.

They were at a distance from Jesus. When the story ends, there's only one of those ten and his proximity has changed. He is not in the same place that he used to be.

Where is he now? At the feet of Jesus. An appropriate response. When grace comes to you, when mercy comes to you, when love comes to you, when God's kindness comes to you in any shape, in any form, the ability to respond appropriately to that will move you from being far to being near.

So if your question is, how can I be close to Jesus? If that's your question, if you feel like I've had a desert time, I've not felt close to the Lord, and so you've not been able to put words to your heart cry, but maybe if your words are, how could I be close to Jesus? The answers are in this story. One guy started out far and he ended up near. And so whatever we pray about, the good prayers for him, it was leprosy, but leprosy was just the hook.

It was just the way God got his attention. All of them got their healing from leprosy. Only one gained intimacy.

Only one got close to Jesus. Only one got to be at his feet, which is why at the end he says, rise, go in your way. Your faith has made you well.

It's made you whole. It's made you complete. There's something that had been fragmented in him and missing, and now it's complete and whole inside of him.

And so anytime the love of Jesus comes your way, the grace of God, the mercy of God, the love of God, the kindness, and in whatever form it comes, a book you're reading at home, a friend's text or phone call, your morning Bible readings, the preached word, the Eucharist, the worship, anytime the kindness and the grace of God is extended toward you in any way, your responsibility is to ask yourself, what does an appropriate response look like? Am I the one, or am I the nine? You know, even growing up, something occurred to me about life, and it bothered me. Remember when you were young and you got your mind fixed on something you really wanted, a bicycle, a skateboard, whatever it was with you, and then you became obsessed about it? That's all you could think. So we didn't used to have the internet, but we used to have other ways.

I have to go to the store and see that thing again. I'm nine, and I've got to go see that cool skateboard. And I didn't like it, the fact that my mind would always drift to that.

I've got to think about that again. I used to think, this is a skateboard, why am I thinking about this so much? I'm only nine, and I was bothered by myself. But I'll tell you what bothered me more, is after I received it, I never grew in more love for my parents who gave it to me.

The gift was actually more important to me than the giver. I did not like that about myself. And I didn't like it for the fact that in two days it wasn't so shiny, and my mind immediately began to go to the next thing I wanted.

I did not know why I did that, and I did not like it. I just know I don't want to be like that with him. I do need mercy like this.

All ten of them needed mercy. But when he shows me the slightest bit of kindness, the slightest bit of mercy, I do not want to just keep on my way. I want to turn my entire life around, engineer it toward him, be riveted on him, and be worshipful, because that gift was meant to bring my heart near to him, the giver.

And when we become overly preoccupied with gifts instead of the giver, the gifts get thinner and more infrequent. They thin out until our heart comes back to a good place. Hallelujah.

By the end of the story, there's one guy at Jesus' feet, and you can't shut him up, because he's overcome with thankfulness. May the Lord make us just like him. Father Stephen, come and lead us in the table.

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