

WHERE ARE THE NINE?

"And" Jesus answering said, "Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?"
Luke 17:17.

In anger a daughter stormed out at her mother and said, "I did not ask to be born. So why should I be grateful for what you do for me? After all, you owe it to me!" Surely Shakespeare was right when he said, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child."

If this be true of earthly parents, how much more deeply our ingratitude must wound the heart of our heavenly Father. And none of us is without sin in this regard. God is so good to us, and yet we are such ingrates, as both our lack of words and proper actions prove. And how such an attitude degrades us. Even a dog will lick the hand that feeds it. Thomas Dexter likens an ungrateful man to a "hog under a tree eating acorns, but never looking up to see where they come from."

We, in the United States, are approaching the Thanksgiving season, where we commemorate and seek to emulate the grateful hearts of the Pilgrim Fathers. But it is also a time when we should examine our own hearts as to our gratitude or lack of it. In so doing we shall discover what ingratitude does to us, and, most of all, to the heart of God.

Nowhere is this seen better than in the words of our text. "And Jesus answering said, "Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?"

"Blow, blow, thou winter wind, thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude. Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky, thou dost not bite so nigh, as benefits forgot." Thus wrote the immortal Bard of Avon. And his words might well be a commentary upon what the ingratitude of nine healed lepers did to the heart of Jesus Christ. There is no more wistful scene in the life of our Lord than this. So great had been the blessing which He gave them! So little had been their gratitude that He inquired "But where are the nine?"

Journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem to attend His last Passover, our Lord was traveling along the borders of Samaria and Galilee, without penetrating far into the interior of either. As He was about to enter an unnamed village, He met ten men, all of whom were in the same sad plight. Since they were not permitted to enter the village, they approached Christ at the entrance.

I. Their Condition.

1. They were lepers.

Stricken with one of the most loathsome diseases to which the human flesh is heir, these ten lepers, nine of whom were Jews and one was a Samaritan, were drawn together in a brotherhood of common misery, and were suffering the horrors and degradation of a malady which was but a living death.

2. They were miserable.

Each of them had to endure terrible suffering. The only prospect of these hopeless human beings was more suffering and an inevitable death.

3. They were ostracized.

Being forbidden by the law to approach others, lest others might be defiled, they dared not come nearer than one hundred and fifty feet to clean people, if the wind was blowing from the direction of the lepers. No one dared to touch a leper lest he contract the disease also. It was unheard of anyone, other than family or close friends, should show kindness to a leper. One Rabbi boasted that he had thrown rocks at a leper to keep him away from him. Lepers were regarded as dead, and usually lived in caves or abandoned tombs.

4. They were humanly incurable.

There was not any human remedy for leprosy. People could only attempt to alleviate the suffering of a leper while the dreadful plague ran its death-working course.

II. Their Cry.

Recognizing Christ when they saw Him approaching, and believing that He could heal them, they appealed to Him for help. In sheer desperation they cried unto Him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Seemingly, they thought that might be their only chance to be healed, so they made the most of their opportunity. Their cry was to the right Person, at the right time, and in the proper spirit.

III. Their Cure.

Christ responded to their earnest and urgent cries with the command, "Go show yourselves unto the priests." Before a healed leper could return to society, his healing had to be certified by a priest, in compliance with the Levitical law (Leviticus 14:2ff). That accounted for the instruction which Christ gave. Without so much as telling them that they were to be cleansed of their leprosy, Christ bade them to take their cure on trust, and proceed to show themselves to the constituted authorities, as persons who had been cured of leprosy. It was a real test, but their implicit faith in Christ enabled them to do it. Instantly the lepers set out in the firm faith that they would be healed.

Two things about this are worthy of note. One is that these men had faith in the willingness and the ability of Christ to heal them, for they started toward the priest before they were healed. Their faith in Christ was soon rewarded, for "as they went, they were cleansed." The word cleansed signifies that it was an instantaneous, miraculous healing.

The other thing is that Christ healed all ten of them without any discrimination. He did not single out one to the neglect of the others. He blessed them without any regard to their merit.

Two things brought about the cure of the lepers, namely, their faith in the word of Christ and their obedience to the will of Christ. His healing power wrought in their bodies as they walked.

This cure of the lepers is suggestive of the bountiful goodness of God toward all men. Christ said, "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). The ancient Jews, like many people today, regarded prosperity as an evidence that God was pleased with a man's life. But the very contrary may be true. Oftentimes a sinful man may prosper materially beyond that of a righteous man. This fact may be interpreted in two ways. One is that the greater blessings of God are not material but spiritual. The other is that the material blessings which God showers upon a sinful man are but a token of the greater blessings of salvation which God longs to give to him.

This principle is basic in the current program of medical missions. The primary purpose of medical missions is not simply the healing of bodies. It is to show the pagan that the same God Who heals his body through the ministry of His missionary can, in Christ, save his soul through faith in the gospel which the missionary preaches.

Likewise, you should not see God's material blessings as an end unto themselves. They are but God's way of saying that there is more that He would give you. You should look beyond the earthly riches that pass away to the eternal spiritual wealth which is God's and which He longs to give to you.

IV. Their Conduct.

Thus far, the experiences of the ten lepers run parallel, but now there is a divergence. Each had received a healthy body, restoration to society, and re-admission to the sanctuary, but here their likeness ended.

Ten lepers had been cleansed. Nine of them went on their way, after getting what they wanted, without going back to express any appreciation to Christ. They did not have a sufficient sense of indebtedness to Christ to thank Him for healing them. They simply went away, taking an invaluable gift with them, without telling Christ that they were grateful to Him for what He had done for them. Their ingratitude stung and brought sadness to our Lord. Right-thinking people are always startled by a display of ingratitude.

What was the cause of their shameful discourtesy? It was their thoughtlessness. They did not think. How heinous is the sin of not thinking! On all sides today there are lamentable signs of the same lack of real gratitude to Christ. Much of

it is the result of thoughtlessness, with its accompaniment of selfishness. What a pity that the majority of people do not express or show any appreciation to the Lord for what He does for them! They are simply content to get all they can from Him, but they do not want to give Him anything in return.

Having discovered that he had been healed, the heart of the Samaritan overflowed with joyous gratitude, so he turned back and came rushing to Christ to do something he had not been commanded to do. He did not go to the priests, as was required by the Mosaic Law, until he had "with a loud voice glorified God, And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks." The pouring out of the devotion of his grateful heart was prompt, humble, reverent, sincere and whole-hearted. Christ not only made him physically whole, but He also gave him the greatest spiritual blessing, which is eternal life. He said to the Samaritan, "Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole."

The Greek word which is translated "made whole" can mean to rescue from danger, to heal a disease, or to save one's soul. The ten lepers had been cleansed, but Jesus Christ singled out this one man as having been made whole. In this light Christ evidently used this word in the sense of spiritual salvation. Like the other nine, this man had received a physical blessing from the Lord. But unlike them he had returned to thank Christ. Christ recognized and honored his personal faith in Him. The Lord Jesus not only healed his body, He saved his soul, because of his repentance and faith.

All ten of the men had received physical cleansing, but only one had received spiritual cleansing. There was the possibility that each of them might at some time again contract leprosy. But never at any future time would the one man be found in a lost spiritual condition, because, on the basis of his repentance and faith, Christ had saved him and would keep him saved and safe.

In our day of professed enlightenment and culture one wonders if the average of those who express their gratitude to the Lord would even reach one out of ten. Phillips Brooks has reminded us that "if there be a crime of deeper dye than all the guilty train of human voices, it is ingratitude." And this is especially true when that ingratitude is directed toward God. To receive His blessings without thanking Him, and to use them outside the sphere of His will, or to scorn His love as revealed in Christ is to wound the heart of the Lord and to miss the highest blessedness in this life. Have you ever said, "I thank Thee, Lord, for giving Thy life for me"?

It is to God that we owe everything. "Every good and every perfect gift cometh down from above." We should thank Him for salvation. Not a day should go by without an expression of thanks unto God for the salvation we have in Christ. We should thank Him for His keeping power. We should thank Him for prayers that He has answered. Quite often we pray earnestly about something, but the answer comes, we fail to thank Him. We are so much like the nine lepers. We go on our ways rejoicing in the blessings received, but failing

to thank Him. We should thank God for His presence with us every day. We should thank Him for His wonderful promises with reference to the future. Let our constant attitude be one of thanksgiving. May we ever be grateful for our salvation, our security, and our sustenance. If our Lord was touched and grieved by the lack of gratitude on the part of the nine lepers who did not give thanks for the cleansing which they received, how greatly He must be stung over our lack of appreciation of the blessings that we take as a matter of course.

On September 6, 1860, when the steamer, Lady Elgin, was sinking in Lake Michigan Edward W. Spencer, a student in Evanston, with great energy and exposure rescued seventeen people. When Spencer was beyond seventy-five years of age, on a public occasion in Los Angeles, Dr. R. A. Torrey asked him if there were anything remarkable about that experience that he had never told. He replied, "Nothing except not one of the seventeen ever hunted me up to say a word of thanks."

Beside a grave in Nashville, Tennessee, a stranger stood one day, and tears streamed down his cheeks as he stooped and set a little slab beside the mound on which were cut the words, "He died for me." The caretaker stepped too his side and asked if it were his father or a brother buried there. "No, he was not a relative, but a young man who fought in my stead, leaving me to support as best I could, my large family. He came and said, 'I will go in your place.' He was wounded at Chickamauga, Georgia, brought to Nashville to the hospital and here he died. I have at last saved up enough money to buy this little slab and to come here from my home in Illinois to see my dear friend's grave." If one mere man could be thought of so lovingly, who had given himself for his friend, what should you and I not do for Him Who gave Himself for us? A favorite hymn reads:

"He saw me plunged in deep distress,
And felw to my relief;
For me He bore the shameful cross,
And carried all my grief."

Let us pause in the rush of life to think of what the Lord has done for us, and to thank Him not only with our words, but also in deeds as we use the blessings which He has given us for His glory.