

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR VICTORIOUS LIVING: REMEMBERING GOD'S BLESSINGS

By Andrew Wilson
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1 Chronicles 16:8-13, 28-34
Luke 17:11-19

Like most good stories, that one is full of surprises.

The first surprise is that those ten lepers took the risk of being seen in public. According to Old Testament law, people suffering from leprosy and a host of other disfiguring skin disorders were supposed to live apart from society. To us it seems cruel and heartless to cast out the sick, but the rationale for ostracizing lepers of course was to protect the general public. In most pre-scientific cultures, people suffering from leprosy were confined to colonies. Leper colonies still exist in many regions of the developing world.

Even to Jesus, who regularly hung out with the poor and the sick, the scene would have been shocking. As Jesus was preparing to enter a small village on the border between Samaria and Galilee, word of his presence somehow reached the local leper colony and ten of the residents left the colony to seek Jesus' help. Most likely, the men had hideous skin lesions all over their bodies, especially on their faces and fingers and toes. The filthy rags they used to wrap their sores identified them as people who should be avoided at all costs.

The scene conjures up scary images – images that are fed to us mostly by the media. Think of the endless stream of movies about Zombies and virus-infected monsters who feed upon blonde supermodels in tank tops. Think of “Night of the Living Dead,” “Flesh Freaks,” “Resident Evil,” “Automaton Transfusion” and 10,000 other films, the titles of which tell you everything you need to know about them.

The story of the ten lepers stirs up our deep-seated fear of disease and death, but it contains a joyful message of redemption. The Lord has his eye on the outcast. He hasn't forgotten those who suffer in silence. The night-of-the-living-dead will soon come to an end, and a new day will dawn.

The second surprise in the story is the way in which the healing of the lepers took place.

Old Testament law outlines an elaborate process for the ritual cleansing of people with skin disorders. It's safe to assume that some or all of the ten lepers had already sought help from the local priests. The priests had administered the treatments prescribed in Leviticus, and nothing had come of it.

Imagine the disappointment of the ten, therefore, when Jesus told them to present themselves to the priests. In their minds Jesus was telling them he wouldn't help them. He was passing them off to the same old doctors so they could administer the same old failed remedies.

A simple analogy might help us to empathize with those poor lepers. Imagine that you're gathered on a Friday night at one of our candlelight prayer services. In walks a friend of yours who has disease that, from a medical point of view, is terminal. When your friend raises her hand and requests healing prayer, the worship leader says to her: "Sorry, you're in the wrong place. You'll need to see a doctor about that."

From the perspective of the lepers, that's essentially what Jesus told them. "Sorry, guys, leprosy is beyond my pay grade. You'd better consult the priests."

Thankfully, what sounded like a no from Jesus was actually a yes. As the lepers made their way to the priests, all of the dreadful symptoms of their disease disappeared. The healings demonstrated Christ's compassion on those who suffer. They were a sign of God's power to heal even the walking dead.

The third surprise in the story is the fact that only one leper returned to thank Jesus. It turns out that he was a Samaritan. This fact made his behavior seem even more remarkable. Samaritans and Jews generally didn't get along. Most Jews thought Samaritans were ritually unclean half-breeds who didn't belong to God's inner circle. So it was really sort of a scandal that the one person who returned to offer his thanks was a Samaritan.

Jesus posed series of rhetorical questions to express his disappointment at the other nine lepers:

"Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

- Luke 17:18

Apparently some or perhaps all of the other nine lepers were Jews. They should have known better. As God's chosen ones, they should have interpreted the healing as a gift from God and fallen on their knees in gratitude. But for some reason it never occurred to them to return to Jesus to thank him.

The story reinforces the message found throughout the Bible that God's Kingdom isn't confined to the nation of Israel. God issues his call to everyone, including those who have been pushed aside by presumed insiders.

The final surprise in the story, maybe the biggest one of all, is revealed at the end. While all ten lepers were healed physically, only one received salvation.

The grateful Samaritan lay facedown before Jesus, thanking him and praising God. And Jesus said to him:

“Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

- Luke 17:19

I believe Jesus’ words have a double meaning. At one level, he’s referring to the physical healing that all ten lepers experienced. They looked to Jesus for healing; they followed his instructions when he told them to go to the priests; and Jesus rewarded them by healing their bodies.

But Jesus is also speaking in spiritual terms. He’s commending the Samaritan for his simple prayer of thanksgiving, and he’s telling him that God has adopted him as his very own child.

Notice the connection that Jesus makes between faith and gratitude. Faith begins when we reach out to the Lord in desperation, and we confess our need for his healing grace and mercy. Faith grows when we make an effort to be obedient to the Lord, even when there’s no obvious reward for doing so. But the final proof of authentic faith is gratitude. Faith that saves us – faith that leads to wholeness and new life – eventually blossoms into praise.

As the story of the ten lepers reminds us, ingratitude is found at all levels of society. Poor people sometimes have just as hard a time saying thank you as do rich people. Nevertheless, poor people and rich people don’t have an equal capacity for thankfulness. Those who have little, materially speaking, seem far more inclined to count their blessings. And those who have a lot, materially speaking, seem far more inclined to whine, complain, worry, feel entitled, and express dissatisfaction with the way their lives are going.

Martin Luther said it like this: “We exhibit a degree of thanksgiving in reverse proportion to the amount of blessings we have received... The greater God’s gifts and works, the less they are regarded.”

- A hungry man is more thankful for his stale crust than a rich man is for his steak and potatoes.
- A lonely kid appreciates being included at the lunch table more than a popular kid appreciates an invitation to a party.
- A Christian in China is more thankful for his dog-eared Bible than we are for all the Christian literature available to us.

Every parent worries about raising ungrateful children. We don’t want our kids to be whiners. We don’t want them to feel entitled to their X Boxes, their Oreo McFlurrys, their early morning cartoons and their trips to Disneyland.

By the way, Pat Chambers explained to me the other day why it is that little boys whine. She says they're practicing to be men.

There are all kinds of things we can do to cultivate gratitude in children. We can start by introducing the concepts of moderation and delayed gratification as early as possible. It also helps to model gratitude by giving thanks at mealtime and bedtime for God's simple gifts.

Another thing we can do is teach our children to worship. Children who worship God regularly tend to look at the good things in their lives as blessings instead of entitlements. They also tend to be more charitable towards others, including those who are different from them.

There's nothing that pleases God more than the songs and prayers of his children. You can be confident that his Holy Spirit is powerfully present and active wherever children gather in his name. That's why worship is a central part of the ministry we offer at the Center for Children.

Why was Christ disappointed when nine of the ten lepers he healed failed to thank him? We've completely missed the point if we think that Jesus somehow needed to feel appreciated and affirmed by those he served. What we should say instead is the lepers needed to give the Lord their thanks. They needed to honor the Lord who had healed their bodies so that that same Lord could heal their spirits, and give them life in his name.

God isn't wrestling with self-esteem issues. He doesn't need us to remind him of his goodness and love. The Lord enjoys our songs and our prayers of thanksgiving because he knows they're good for us. Our worship leads to greater intimacy with God. And greater intimacy with God always translates into greater love for other people. That's why God is able to use our worship to mold us into the joyful and loving people he wants us to be.

The Bible tells us we should be grateful to God for *everything* that comes our way, including our temptations and our trials. In the Letter of James we read:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

- James 1:2-4

The First Letter of Peter echoes those words:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

When we give thanks in the midst of suffering, what we're saying to God is: "I may not understand what you're up to right now. But I trust you to see me through. And I trust you to bring good out of bad, just as you did when Jesus suffered and died on the cross."

I have a good friend in the Dominican Republic who's the pastor of a church and the superintendent of a large school. I've known Tanis for about 18 years, and I've watched him over most of that time struggle with one major challenge after another. Tanis and his wife, Esther, live with their two kids in Las Colinas, which is one of the poorest neighborhoods outside of San Pedro. It has only been in the past few years that Tanis has realized his dream of opening a Christian school for kids whose parents can't afford any of the local schools.

Tanis emailed my wife recently to thank our SPARKS kids for the books they sent for their new school library. Ask yourself, as I read, if Tanis sounds like a guy who ever spent a day in his life whining about his low salary, or the long hours he has to put in to grow his church and school [PAPER]:

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Jesus:

By the grace of Jesus we are ALIVE, we have lived [through] many traumatic moments because of the storms that [have] affected our country... Some little houses of our brothers and sisters in Esperanza had been affected, the good thing is that everyone is alive and can restart again, praise God.

Now there is an outbreak of illness and many of us, teachers, students, church and family members are being affected by conjunctivitis causing us to be out of all activity for more than a week. Praise the Lord we are back... We know God is in control.

We are rejoicing for the new atmosphere of inspiration we have in the school, our teachers are doing better work, using all the materials we have... It is amazing to see every day the students that come to take class in the morning coming back in the afternoon to work in the library. It gives us the hope that many things will change in their lives now they are not expending so much time playing...without supervision.

We praise the Lord for you brothers and sisters that [he] is using to [help] this ministry whose vision is to change the lives of the poorest kids of our community through education, having the Word of God as our priority....

Love in Jesus,

Tanis

No matter what our circumstances in life might be, God always presents us with a choice. We can complain about the things we don't have and the things we wish we could change. Or we can be thankful for our daily blessings. The choice we make, over time, will largely determine both our character and our destiny.

So remember God's blessings. Cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Praise God every day for his Son, Jesus, who offers wholeness and new life to all who put their faith in him.