Believers Grow

OCTOBER 17, 2010

Are You a Grateful Leper?

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:11-19)

They sit together, yet all alone. Cut off from other human contact, they are barely able to work up the motivation to eat. As each day passes, their hope of rescue flickers and flutters like a dying candle. Every day is the same hopeless existence. There is no escape. Life is nothing more than a funeral dirge, slowly playing itself out. Death is imminent. Life has thrown them a curve they can’t hit. Their only hope is a miracle. But just when it seems the candle will finally be snuffed out—they hear something. Could it be? Could there really be someone out there? Could there actually be someone who could help? It’s almost too painful to get their hopes up—but they can’t help it. This is their only chance—their only hope.

I don’t know how many of you were able to watch the improbable rescue of 33 Chilean miners this past week, but it was riveting television. And even more riveting is their story. For 69 days, they were trapped in a mine, half a mile beneath the earth’s surface—by tons of rock. For 17 days, these men lived in that mine without any contact with the outside world. They had no idea if anyone was trying to find them or would ever find them. With each passing day, the hope of rescue must have flickered like a dying candle. It must have seemed like they were just playing out the string until they died. And then, on that 17th day, something broke through the rock. And nearly 70 days after they became trapped, they were rescued. Can you even begin to imagine what that must have been like for them? It’s impossible, isn’t it? Even the rescuers, who spent less than a full day in that cave can’t truly imagine what it was like—trapped without any means of escape. But I can be sure of one thing: every single one of those miners is grateful today! They are overflowing with thankfulness for their rescue! Considering what they had gone through and how hopeless it must have seemed, how couldn’t they be thankful?

That life-threatening situation was similar in a way to the life of a leper. A leper was among fellow lepers, but at the same time all alone. These lepers were completely cut off from society—how depressing! As each day went by and their leprosy remained, the hope of being cured and rescued from this crippling disease flickered like a dying candle. Every day was the same hopeless, humiliating existence. Their life was one long, painfully slow funeral march. Death was imminent and unavoidable. Their only hope was a miracle! “Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him.” Could it be? Could this actually be the one person who could help? It’s almost too painful to get their hopes up—but they can’t help it. He was their only chance—their only hope.

“They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.” When it seemed like all was lost, like the candle of their lives was going to be snuffed out, Jesus appeared. Jesus of Nazareth, the great prophet, the great miracle worker, the only one who could help! If anyone could help, it was him. But they didn’t dare go near him. They were unclean, unwanted. So they called out to him from a distance. The implored Jesus to show them mercy—to pity the pitiful. And Jesus, our ever merciful Savior, showed them mercy. By the power of his almighty Word, he cured every single leper. Bowing to the law which he was fulfilling for us, he told those men to show themselves to the priests, as Moses had commanded. And as they were on the way they were cured!

This miracle would have made for riveting television, wouldn’t it? The plight of the lepers was tragic. Most of us can’t imagine for a minute what it must have been like for them to be completely cut off from the rest of society. We can’t imagine just playing out the string of life without any means of escaping that leprous prison. But we can be sure of one thing: every single one of those lepers was grateful—or…at least most of them were…I mean half of them were…or just one? How could only one leper be grateful enough to say “thank you?” Considering what they had lived through and how it must have seemed hopeless, how could they not be thankful?

So far this morning, we’ve operated under the premise that we can’t really relate to the Chilean miners or to these ten lepers. But that’s a false premise, isn’t it? No, we haven’t physically been cut off from society. No, we have never been imprisoned physically in the same manner as those miners. But we can relate. The Bible uses the picture of leprosy to help us think about our spiritual condition. And many are the parallels! Sin cuts us off from God. Sinners can’t bear to stand in his holy presence and he can’t stand to have them either! Living with the infection of sin is a depressing existence, even if you don’t realize it. You see, like leprosy at that time, there’s no cure for sin. You can’t go to the doctor and get a salve or a balm or a pill to take your sin away. Every day is one day closer to death because that’s what sin brings. Death is
Faith Ev. Lutheran Church

imminent and unavoidable! The only hope for sin is for someone else to intervene! The only hope for sin is a miracle!

And God has given us that miracle in his Son, Jesus! Jesus came with the balm of Gilead—the forgiveness of our sins. Like those lepers, who cried out to Jesus for pity and mercy, we cry out to God every week—“Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy!” And every week, only because he is merciful, Jesus cleanses us from our sins. He washes those sins away by applying his life, his sacrifice, and his resurrection to us. Every week, we stand in God’s presence and he declares us clean, forgiven through the pastor, because of what Jesus has done for us. While we physically can’t comprehend the plight of a leper or of the Chilean miners, we can spiritually! And I’m sure of one thing: every single Christian—every single person—has a reason to be overflowing with thanksgiving! But are we? Sometimes I wonder?

On September 8th, 1860, off the coast of Evanston, Illinois, the Lady Elgin shipwrecked. Some students of Northwestern University saw the wreck and came to the rescue. One student, Edward Spenser, personally saved the lives of 17 people that day. Years later, a reporter was writing a follow-up story on the event, and went to interview the now elderly Spenser. When asked what was the one thing that stood out about the incident in his mind, Spenser replied, “I remember that of the 17 people I saved that day, not one of them ever thanked me.”

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” What a pitiful revelation of human nature! What ingratitude! This isn't typical, is it? This can't be a picture of 90% of the people in the world. Or can it? Nine of these men were seemingly Jews—people of the covenant. Nine of these men had been recipients of God's special grace their whole lives. They had God’s Word! They had the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They had advantages that the rest of the world did not! If anyone should have known where their cleansing had come from, it should have been the nine Jews! But those who had it all, took it all for granted. “Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”” Are we really that much unlike them?

There is a story about a man whose wife had left him. He was completely depressed. He had lost faith in himself, in people, and in God. He found no joy in living. One rainy morning this man went to a small neighborhood restaurant for breakfast. Although several people were at the diner, no one was speaking to anyone else. This man hunched over his coffee, stirring it with a spoon. In one of the booths by the window was a mother with her little girl. They had just been served their food when the little girl broke the sad silence by nearly shouting, “Momma, can we say our prayers here?” Their waitress who had just served them turned around and said, “Sure honey, we can pray here. Will you say the prayer for us?” And the little girl turned around and looked at the rest of the people in the restaurant and said, “Bow your heads.” Surprisingly, one by one, the heads went down. The little girl bowed her head, folded her hands, and said, “God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for our food. Amen.”

But as much as this story talks about the ingratitude of the nine, the most important point is the thankfulness of the one! One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan…Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” The irony of the story is the thankful one was the Samaritan. The half-breed, the outcast, the Gentile, the one considered unholy by the Jews, showed the holiness that comes as a result of true faith in God. He expressed his thanks! And to this man, Jesus not only gave a physical blessing, but also promised a spiritual blessing. He said, “Rise and go, your faith has made you well.” Through his faith given by the Holy Spirit, this man was not only healed physically, but spiritually. He not only went home with a clean body, but a clean soul. The other nine had been freed from the misery of leprosy, but were still in bondage to the misery of ingratitude. There is nothing to suggest they believed Jesus was something more than a physical healer. God’s salvation isn’t just for Jews; it is for all of us who don't deserve it! For that, we can't help but throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet and give thanks! Jesus teaches us through this Samaritan that “A Believer Grows through a Life of Thanksgiving!” And Jesus gives us a good reason to be thankful! Jesus died for all of our sins, all of our ungratefulness. He paid for all of the times that we have acted like the other nine. He has given us not only physical healing and blessings, but he has given us the spiritual blessing of forgiveness and eternal life. Like the one grateful leper, those blessings are ours through faith. You and I are grateful lepers. We have been healed from the leprosy of our sin-sick soul. Let’s make sure that our lives demonstrate that truth! Let’s return and give thanks where it is due. Even in the midst of struggle and trials, never stop remembering what we have to be thankful for. We’ve lived the Chilean miner story. We’ve lived the ten leper story! How can we not be thankful! Live out the words of the Apostle Paul: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is the will of God in Christ concerning you!” Join me, in humbly being a grateful leper. Amen.

Black River Falls and Cataract, WI

That prayer changed the entire atmosphere in the room. People began to talk with one another. “We should do that every morning,” the waitress said. Even the man who was depressed changed: “All of a sudden, my whole frame of mind started to improve. From that little girl's example, I started to thank God for all that I did have and stopped dwelling on all that I didn't have. I started to be grateful.” We all understand and appreciate the importance of gratitude. It can drastically improve relationships. In fact, one of the first things we were taught and that we teach our children is to express their gratitude. Someone gives them a gift and we say: “Now what do you say?” And the child at an early age learns the answer: “Thank you.” And who doesn’t appreciate being thanked? Yet, when it comes to giving thanks to our heavenly Father, we often miss the mark.

But as much as this story talks about the ingratitude of the nine, the most important point is the thankfulness of the one! One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan…Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” The irony of the story is the thankful one was the Samaritan. The half-breed, the outcast, the Gentile, the one considered unholy by the Jews, showed the holiness that comes as a result of true faith in God. He expressed his thanks! And to this man, Jesus not only gave a physical blessing, but also promised a spiritual blessing. He said, “Rise and go, your faith has made you well.” Through his faith given by the Holy Spirit, this man was not only healed physically, but spiritually. He not only went home with a clean body, but a clean soul. The other nine had been freed from the misery of leprosy, but were still in bondage to the misery of ingratitude. There is nothing to suggest they believed Jesus was something more than a physical healer. God’s salvation isn’t just for Jews; it is for all of us who don't deserve it! For that, we can't help but throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet and give thanks! Jesus teaches us through this Samaritan that “A Believer Grows through a Life of Thanksgiving!” And Jesus gives us a good reason to be thankful! Jesus died for all of our sins, all of our ungratefulness. He paid for all of the times that we have acted like the other nine. He has given us not only physical healing and blessings, but he has given us the spiritual blessing of forgiveness and eternal life. Like the one grateful leper, those blessings are ours through faith. You and I are grateful lepers. We have been healed from the leprosy of our sin-sick soul. Let’s make sure that our lives demonstrate that truth! Let’s return and give thanks where it is due. Even in the midst of struggle and trials, never stop remembering what we have to be thankful for. We’ve lived the Chilean miner story. We’ve lived the ten leper story! How can we not be thankful! Live out the words of the Apostle Paul: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is the will of God in Christ concerning you!” Join me, in humbly being a grateful leper. Amen.

Pastor Nathan Berg