
Prayers

To God

Jesus, my Lord and Master. Other people regard speaking to You as beyond all reason and comprehension, but I know You, I believe in You, and You are not a figment of my imagination. May my words and deeds always show the reality of my faith and may others see in me not just religion, but a personal commitment to love, truth, honesty and all that is good. May they see in my life powerful evidence of Your love, and may they seek to know more about You. **AMEN**

For myself

Weekly theme: Going the extra mile

Pray for yourself and your own motivation to work. You may do what you do each day without thinking, you may dislike your work, or you may love it and look forward to it. Let the Lord God speak to you about your approach to your daily work, and what it means to 'go the extra mile' as a witness to godliness and love.

For others

Pray for those who are forced to live and work extreme hours and for little pay. Pray for commercial justice in our troubled world, and pray for moral integrity to be found amongst those who both give employment to others and who claim to be Your people.

Meditation

Lord Jesus, what do you need me to hear today?

A shattering earthquake which overturns my world
So that You can replace it with Your greater vision?

A quiet voice that whispers hidden truths to my ear
Which require I act in discretion for the good of all?

The sweet music of success encouraging me onwards
To greater things, and higher hopes for all to come?

A cacophony of sound coming from all life's pressures
So demanding on me I know that I need Your help?

The silence of Your eternal 'stop' which tells me I must
Take my rest and find my soul's promised peace?

Lord Jesus, bless me as I listen for You today ...

Bible Passage

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee, ¹² and as He came into a village, He was approached by ten lepers who kept their distance. ¹³ They called out and shouted,

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

¹⁴ When He saw them, He said,

"Go and show yourselves to the priests."

And as they began to go, they were cleansed! ¹⁵ When one of them saw that he was healed, he turned back and cried out,

"Glory to God!"

¹⁶ Then he threw himself down at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

Now this man was a Samaritan, ¹⁷ and Jesus asked,

"Were not ten cleansed? Where then are the other nine? ¹⁸ Was no one else willing to return and give glory to God except this stranger?"

¹⁹ Then Jesus said to him,

"Stand up and go on your way; your faith has saved you."

Review

This is a well known story of Jesus that has been well used by leaders and preachers for centuries. On the face of it, the story is simple. Jesus is travelling somewhere near the borders of Galilee and Samaria, and a group of lepers call out to Him for help. He challenges them to believe they are healed and prove this by showing themselves to a priest, and all ten of them are obedient and take His advice. However, one turns back to Jesus to give glory to God for his healing and is commended for his faith. Surprisingly, this man is a Samaritan, but despite his not being one of God's people, his faith is blessed by Jesus.

There are many straightforward preaching points here concerning the healing ministry. A preacher can dwell on the power of God to heal the dreadful disease of leprosy, on the importance of giving glory to God for healing received, on the faith shown either by shouting out for help or returning to worship the Lord. The reading has often been used in services of healing where it can encourage people who struggle with their own conditions and struggle with faith in the midst of difficult, chronic illness. Certainly, this story is a great blessing to many, but is it right to approach the passage as if its entire message is about healing?

There is more for us to uncover if we avert our eyes for a moment from our human need for healing to study the Lord who gives it, whose ministry is ultimately about the salvation of souls. At this point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is turning away from the ministry he exercised in Galilee and is headed towards Jerusalem where he will meet His destiny in God's plan of

salvation. There are some fascinating stories of Jesus to come in this Gospel before the stories of Christ's passion, but Luke is also in the process of concluding his description of Jesus' ministry, and this incident is important, indeed, the Gospel would not be complete without it.

If we turn back to Luke 7:22, we read this about Jesus' ministry, *'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed ...'*. But although we read a different story about Jesus healing a leper in Matthew and Mark (Matt 8:1f., Mark 1:40), there has been no such story in Luke's Gospel so far! It was essential for Luke to provide a story of such a healing for his description of Jesus' ministry to be complete. So why is this story so different from the one told by Matthew and Mark? They tell a simple story of a single leper who comes quietly to worship Jesus and ask for healing, whereupon Jesus obliges, and tells the man to get his healing verified by a priest. So if Jesus healed lepers on a number of occasions and told them all to go to a priest so that they could gain access to community life again, what more does Luke's story reveal, and why?

The heart of this story here in Luke is this. After Jesus has just been speaking to the disciples about their responsibilities as leaders (17:1-10), He now shows them the clear difference between healing and the full message of the Gospel which is salvation. In Jesus day as in ours, healing was available from various sources, indeed, the Old Testament accepts this and gives clear and elaborate advice to priests about how to test for such healing (Leviticus 14:2f.). But for Jesus, the important thing is the salvation of the soul not merely the healing of a sickness, however important that blessing might be.

If you read early in the story where the ten lepers shout out to Jesus and gain His attention and advice, Luke says specifically that after they are obedient to Him the ten lepers are *'cleansed'*. In that moment, Jesus knows this and the lepers know that their symptoms and physical disabilities have been cured, but verification by the priest will mean they can go home to their loved ones again. How wonderful! This is the blessing of healing and new life, that is, earthly life. Nine of the lepers are happy with this, as they should be.

One leper however is touched by the Spirit of God to perceive something more, even though he is not an Israelite, and outside the covenant of Abraham. He does not find it necessary to be obedient to a priest according to Scripture, he is content to give glory to God for what Jesus has done, and returns to Him in an attitude of worship, crying, *'glory to God'* (17:15)! In this moment, a Gentile sinner accepts Jesus as Lord and God, which is quite different from the attitude of the other nine who have happily received a blessing from Jesus as a healer. This man is one of the first to receive the blessings of God's covenant of grace through His Son Jesus.

It is therefore no surprise that Jesus says to the one leper at the end of the story, *'stand up and go on your way; your faith has saved you'* (17:19). The words are all significant. *'Stand up and go'* is a command of God used throughout Scripture instructing people to start something new for God (see *'going deeper'*, below). This Samaritan is commended for the one attribute so lacking in the disciples, which is that of faith; remember the disciples have just asked Jesus to, *'increase our faith'* (17:5)! Most crucially, Luke changes the word he uses to describe the healing of the leper in the last sentence, and he does this for good reason; he says, *'your faith has saved you'* (17:19). Frankly, most translations do not spot the significance of this and alter what the New Testament text says here. The Greek used here is the word for salvation, i.e. *'sozo'*, but most Bibles translate it *'healed'*, on the basis that healing and salvation are often the same thing. But they are not the same thing here. The leper is not just cured, cleansed or healed, his soul is saved!

The Gospel of Luke is slowly and gradually winding up to some powerful and stunning climaxes before the final story of the death and resurrection of our Lord, and it should be no surprise to us that this story about Jesus' healing ministry points us towards the ultimate goal

of Christ's work. This is not just a ministry of healing but the gift of salvation for all who worship Jesus, both Jews and (Samaritan) Gentiles. Yes, there is yet more than this to our passage today, but with this in mind, we are heading in the right direction.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V13 *'they called out and shouted'*

Other translations:

'called out in a loud voice (NIV)

'called out saying' (NRSV)

The Greek text here translates simply like this; *'they took up their voices saying'*. This phrase *'they took up'* is used however to tell the reader that because the lepers were some way off to prevent infection, they had to shout at Jesus. Different Bible versions translate this variously, but I reckon it best to use the word 'shout' because this is so obviously how the lepers attracted Jesus' attention.

V14 *'show yourselves to the priests'*

All the translations have the same, and I have not strayed from this text. However, it is worth noting that the Greek word for 'show' can mean 'prove'. As we explore in the study, the lepers had to do what Jesus said to prove that they were healed by His word. Someone reading this in the first century would naturally be aware of this subtlety, but it is not obvious in English.

V18 *'was no one else willing to return ...'*

Other translations:

'was no one found to return ...' (NIV)

'no one returned ...' (CEB)

The Greek sentence reads, *'was there found non returning ...'* This rather colloquial phrase simply expresses Jesus' surprise that no one else returned. In straightforward English, we do not speak readily of people being 'found to return', so I have taken a small liberty with the words to express this surprise in what is perhaps a more natural phraseology, without losing completely the sense of surprise, as in the CEB translation above.

V19 *'Stand up and go ... your faith has saved you'*

Other translations:

'Rise and go ... your faith has made you well' (NIV)

'Get up and go ... your faith has made you well' (NRSV)

So what is the fuss about these words, which seem perfectly straightforward? However this phrase is translated, it is found a vast number of times in the Old and New Testaments. *'Get up and go'*, or its various translations was, for example, the command given to Jonah by God (Jonah 1:2), and the angel's

command to Philip to approach the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26). In each instance, it signifies a command of God to begin something important. Here, the healed leper is commanded to start a new life of salvation, healed of his leprosy.

Further Comments

The role of a priest in dealing with leprosy

In Leviticus 13:2-14:32, Scripture gives detailed instructions by which a priest determines whether someone is cured of leprosy or not. Given medical knowledge of the disease available today, it is hard to imagine how anyone could have actually been healed in ancient times, but it apparently happened; otherwise these instructions would have been utterly superfluous.

These rules are part of the social and religious fabric of Israel's national life, and it has been argued that they make basic provision for cleanliness within a community before the time of antiseptic creams and an understanding of the importance of washing. Instead of simply dismissing these regulations as irrelevant now we have a better understanding of them, it is perhaps wise for us to respect the attempts made to provide for public health. Each generation can only deal with what it knows, in the hope that this will prove to the benefit of all.

We often express horror at the idea of the separation of lepers from society in ancient time. But we had better remember that isolation is still an important tool in the armoury of health care for those fortunately rare diseases that are highly infectious and highly dangerous. We should not presume that health care today simply delivers everything we want, without cost or worry. It does not.

Falling down to worship

In verse 16, the leper throws himself down at Jesus' feet to worship Him. Such an action is reported of other lepers who are healed by Jesus in the other Gospels (see Matthew 8:2). The action of falling down on one's knees to worship, or even falling flat down on the ground, is strongly associated with pure worship in the Bible. Satan demands this of Jesus in the famous story of the temptations, but Jesus will not (Matthew 4:9); the prophets Isaiah and Daniel uses these words to describe the obeisance of pagan worshippers (Isaiah 44:19, 46:6, Daniel 3:5,6,10,11); Psalm speak of kings 'falling down' in worship of the living God (Psalm 72:11), mocking the kings of the earth who expect people to do just this to them! Lastly, Chronicles describes people 'falling down' to worship the living God in His Temple (2 Chronicles 20:18).

When people worship God today they sit down on chairs to get comfortable, or perhaps if the worship is dictated by music, they stand to 'party'. At one level there is nothing wrong with this. But if we want to get to the heart of worship we will not find it by getting comfortable for a service or a musical feast even in honour of God. The idea of falling flat down on the ground before God remains a powerful description of what it means to be before the God who made all things and who alone is worthy to be praised. There are many beautiful descriptions of worship in the Bible and it is unfortunate if we associate it just with standing to party or sitting comfortably.

Healing and cleansing

In Biblical times, salvation, healing and cleansing were perceived to be very different things. Salvation was about one's ultimate relationship with God, healing was about physical (and

mental) well being, and cleansing was about one's everyday relationship with God. Rules set down in the Old Testament specified what was acceptable to God in everyday life and what was not. For example, certain foods were 'clean' and others were 'unclean' and not to be eaten. The early books of the Bible provide religious rituals for dealing with all three, an example of rules about healing is given above, rules about sin and one's relationship with God are set out in the first few chapters of Leviticus, and rules of cleanliness are given in a number of chapters of Leviticus from chapter 10 onwards.

The Gospel declares that all these come together, and the message we preach as God's people today is at its best when they do. In Christ there are now no natural barriers to our relationship with God; cleanliness and uncleanliness are irrelevant, and we gain access to God not through our own merit of cleanliness, but through Jesus Christ, God's Son. He has taken away the power of our sin, so all we need to do is confess it and turn to Him. In Him our life is secure, so that whatever our state of health, which naturally varies throughout life, we find our healing in Him, and His Spirit is able to bless us with miraculous healing. This blessing is not a measure of our faith, it is a pure gift of love from God the Father, and is to be received with thanksgiving.

Discipleship

Application

Crying out for healing - a step to salvation

When people cry out for healing, it is normally because they are in desperate circumstances and need help, just as the ten lepers who shouted at Jesus. The Christian faith has long copied the ministry of Jesus and sought to respond to such cries with a ministry of healing that goes to the heart of sickness and suffering. Much good Christian work has been done including missionary work and pioneering medical work, by addressing people's physical and sometimes mental and spiritual needs for healing.

However, the message of the Gospel is that while Christ delights to meet earthly needs, He is ultimately concerned for the ultimate spiritual welfare of all people and their righteousness before God. For this reason, healing ministry must be seen as one part of a wider ministry to the individual, the ministry of the salvation of souls.

Of course, those in the church who have difficulties with evangelism find it simpler to focus on 'healing' ministry, without any emphasis on issues of personal spiritual destiny. Indeed, those who work in secular health establishments must steer clear of spiritual matters if they want to keep their jobs! But the church should be careful not to allow the great good of healing ministry to become an end in itself. The full responsibility of God's people is to call all people to faith and salvation in Christ Jesus, and the route to this may well be through the ministry of healing. The God in whom we believe loves each soul created and longs for them to decide, like the one leper, to turn around and worship Jesus, have faith, and be both healed and saved.

Lepers and chronic illnesses

It is worth considering whether leprosy in the Bible represents chronic illness in general. A number of illnesses are mentioned in the Bible (the woman with an issue of blood - Matt 9:20f., and the woman whose spine was bent - Luke 13:11f., for example), but leprosy is perhaps the most common, because of the emphasis it receives in the Old Testament and the stigma attached to this dreadful disease.

Today, much stigma still attaches to chronic illness. One of these is the perception of people scrounging off the state instead of working, and another is the feeling of being unconnected with normal humanity in social settings. Jesus gives hope to all who suffer the stigma of chronic illness, and this hope is found through submission and worship. Some may find it hard to turn to Jesus in today's world of religious debate and use of Christ's name as a swear word, but when people come to Him in pure unfettered worship, all things become possible, and the hope of salvation is a powerful antidote to the stigma of illness.

Ideas for what to do

- How can the ministries of healing and salvation be combined in such a way as does not cause offence, or are the two destined to be kept apart because people in church cannot cope with them both? Think about this question and seek an opportunity to talk with others about it.
- Find an opportunity to pray with others who are sick, and as you do so pray about the salvation of those for whom you pray. By keying into God's heart in this way you open yourself up to all manner of spiritual possibilities.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this story tell us about Jesus' healing ministry, its methods and its working?
2. What does this story tell us about the Gospel message of salvation, and those for whom it is intended?
3. What difference does worship make to the story, and how may we worship the Lord in a way that is appropriate for the ministries of healing and salvation?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You healed people while you were on earth, and were able to deal with every sickness put before you! Did you ever get sick, or know what it was like to have a cold or break a limb? Did you know what it was like to be healed Yourself? I ask, dear Lord, because there are so many people who suffer from illnesses and physical impairment, You must surely understand their problems. Hear my prayer, for we need Your healing power now!

Bless us with humility before the Gospel of grace that we may minister healing whenever and wherever it is right, and so bless those in desperate need. We pray this in Your name, Lord Jesus Christ:

AMEN