

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our heavenly Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 17:11-19 (EHV)

¹¹ On another occasion, as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he was passing along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² When he entered a certain village, ten men with leprosy met him. Standing at a distance, ¹³ they called out loudly, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they went away they were cleansed.

¹⁵ One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, thanking him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus responded, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Get up and go your way. Your faith has saved you.”



Dear heavenly Father, whether we stand far off or have come near, send us your Holy Spirit so you may open our ears, minds and hearts to Jesus as he speaks of your love and mercy to us. Amen.

Ten poor lepers, standing far away.

Ten poor lepers, healed by Christ that day.

And if one poor leper, should turn and thank his Lord,

There'd be nine poor lepers dancing on their way!

On the face of it, this story about ten lepers being healed by Jesus could be about giving thanks. After all, while all ten were cleansed, only one returned to say thank you.

One out of ten seems a bit poor. After all, if we only had a ten percent success ratio in our work (like one in ten crops making any money, one in ten mechanical repairs being fixed, or one in ten students passing their grade), this might not just be heart-breaking, but it may also mean we lose our job!

Even in the church this would be hard to bear. For example, when we work hard at educating our children in the faith but only have about one out of ten of them remaining in the church into their adulthood, we might wonder what we're doing wrong. Unfortunately, this is a common statistic and the one in ten ratio may even seem a little optimistic!

On the other hand, a ten percent return on any investment might be considered to be quite reasonable! After all, when was the last time we received ten percent interest for our investments from our banks?

But the story of the ten lepers *isn't* just about ten percent giving thanks.

The story's also about leprosy, isolation, brokenness, and keeping one's distance from a community. It's about sin, healing, and forgiveness. It's about giving thanks and praise to God. But above all, it's about *getting close to Jesus*.

Early in the story we hear of the ten lepers standing *at a distance*. They weren't allowed to come close to Jesus (or anyone else for that matter) for fear of infecting him with their skin disease.

But leprosy wasn't just a skin disease. It was also a *social disease*.

We can only wonder how many times they'd been rejected because of their disease, their unsightly looks, their smell, and their poverty. Their leprosy had isolated them and cut them off from every other community except for fellow lepers.

This meant they weren't allowed to go to the shops, the cinema, or a park. They weren't allowed to attend birthday parties, weddings, funerals, or worship. They couldn't receive a pat on the shoulder, a hug, or a kiss, not even from their families. They were cut off from every loving community and had to stand at a distance *from everyone* because of their leprosy.

Like leprosy, sin also cuts us off from communities.

An angry, abusive, or thoughtless word can make us want to run away and hide from others or can make them want to stay away from us. So, while we may not have a skin disease, we all have a social disease that often results with us isolating ourselves from further hurt, insult, abuse, or from being taken advantage of.

We avoid each other because we're afraid of the pain which comes with community, such as the pains of rejection, the scars of broken trust, and the kick in the guts from disappointment. As a consequence, we, or they, avoid each other's parties, weddings, funerals, or church services. Sure, we might miss out on further pain, but we also miss out on their touch, their comfort, their support, or their love.

So, like leprosy, sin creates distance between us and splits apart marriages, families, communities, and congregations through gossip, infidelity, short tempers, jealousy, arrogance, judgmental attitudes, self-centredness, and disrespect. Sin is a social disease which breaks apart relationships – our relationships with each other, and ultimately, our relationship with God.

Just like Adam and Eve in the garden we too still try to hide from his searching face, we still excuse ourselves from sin by blaming everyone but ourselves, and we still, like the lepers, stand far off, not wanting him to come too close out of fear he may see us for who we truly are.

So, on that day there were ten lepers suffering from this social disease, but how many are there today?

In fact, aren't each of us here lepers of one sort or another?

Haven't each of us felt the empty pangs of isolation and loneliness? Haven't each of us been infected with pride or arrogance which wants to judge and separate ourselves from others? Haven't each of us been isolated from other people because of misunderstandings, presumptions, or abuse? Haven't each of us felt like we stand at a distance from others...or even from God?

But despite the distance between us and God, and the distances between each other, we still have a longing.

We long for wholeness and healing. We long for acceptance and love. We long for a restoration in our relationships. We long for closeness and intimacy. We long for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Knowing we're in no state to demand it or presume it, we come as beggars appealing for mercy, for wholeness, and for restoration. As beggars and lepers, we feel estranged from God and estranged from our loved ones. We feel the pain of distance and separation. We've been hurt by others, and we've made sure we hurt them back, either by our words and physical force, or by our silence and absence. Our sin has shamed us, broken us, and divided us, and we grieve the distance between us.

Yet despite our distances, we cry for Jesus to have mercy on us.

And how does Jesus react to this cry for mercy?

Does he run away from hurtful and hurting people, or run away from the ugliness of sin and its effects? Does he try to avoid us, hoping to hurt us by his own distance from us? Does he make fun of us and the complications we get ourselves into?

No, the leprosy of our sin doesn't frighten him. He comes near to us, speaks to us, touches us, cleanses us, heals us, and restores us.

For example, at the beginning of our worship service we acknowledged the distances between ourselves and God and the distances we experience between ourselves as we confessed our sin. As beggars we pleaded for his mercy.

And Jesus has indeed had mercy on us!

Jesus declares us forgiven, cleansed, reconciled, and restored to God.

We're thankful because Jesus has had mercy on us. He has mercy on broken, hurting and isolated people. He's restored our relationship with God our Father through his forgiveness. He took on all the ugliness and isolation of our sin to the

cross for us. He took our place as the One abandoned by God so we might be fully restored to him.

Not only this, but he felt the isolation of death on the cross so we don't have to. For the sake of Jesus, we no longer stand at a distance from God but can now come to kneel at his feet unafraid.

Imagine how this leper felt now he was restored to the community and could touch, hug and kiss people again. He could have run off to his family, to his friends, or to the pub!

But no, the first person he longed to touch is Jesus; his Saviour, healer, and restorer.

We too get to touch him. As we kneel at the feet of Jesus at the altar, we get to hold his body in our fingers and let his holy blood course through our veins, being reassured of his love, acceptance, and forgiveness. His loving touch assures us we're now restored, made whole, and reconciled through Jesus.

Yet we haven't just been reconciled to God through the body and blood of Jesus, but we've also been reconciled to the community. We're restored to the community of the forgiven and are therefore no longer alone. Here, as we belong to the body of Christ, we're loved and valued by fellow restored lepers.

This means that thankfully there's not just one forgiven leper at Jesus' feet, but many others come to kneel before Jesus with us. Here we come to Jesus with the whole community of forgiven and cleansed lepers.

Through the power of his forgiveness, and as ones who have received mercy from Christ, we're more willing to forgive and show mercy to others. With the Holy Spirit's help, we're able to forgive as we've been forgiven.

The first people we do this with is the community of the forgiven as we gather in Jesus' presence, but with God's help we may also learn to forgive and be restored to the community of the unforgiven outside of worship. Through our mercy toward them, they may learn of Jesus' mercy, which may awaken their own longing to get close to Jesus themselves.

As ones who have received mercy, we continue to cry, "Lord, have mercy" for all the broken and isolated people in the world. We cry on behalf of all the isolated and hurting lepers of the world, broken and made ugly by the sin which infects them.

We pray for Jesus to heal, restore, and reconcile the whole world to himself. We pray for peace and justice for the victims of violence, abuse, disrespect, and

tragedy. We pray for Jesus to have mercy on the dying and the grieving. We pray for Jesus to have mercy on all people.

Of course, like the ten lepers, there'll be some, perhaps even ninety per cent of them, who'll miss or ignore the invitation to get close to Jesus. They'll still want to go their own way, go about their normal routines, or forget who provides mercy and healing for a broken and hurting world. But the risk of only one in ten never stopped Jesus from showing his compassion and grace to *all ten*.

So, while today's text is about ten lepers, it's also our story.

It's a story of people distanced from God through the results of the sickness of sin, calling out for Jesus to have mercy. It's a story of people like you and me being shown mercy, being forgiven, and receiving healing, restoration, and renewal. It's a story of us responding to his loving mercy through thankfulness and praise. It's a story of us getting close to Jesus so we may be assured of his faithful and enduring love.

In the end, it's a story of the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, which will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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