

Luke 17:11-19 The Master's Mercy

The Word of the Lord from Luke 17: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

This is the Word of the Lord. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Ten Lepers

If you want an illustration of the mercy of Jesus, you need look no further than this parable.

Jesus is still on the way to Jerusalem, Luke's way of saying that He's making His way to the cross, His death for our sins. When people are confronted with critical situations or serious afflictions, they usually fall prey to tunnel vision: focusing on what lies ahead for them, they become unaware of the needs of others. It is not so for the Savior: it would surely be enough for Him to go straight to Calvary and pay that price of redemption, to deliver us from death and hell. But on the way, Jesus still stops to deliver people from all sorts of sicknesses and affliction.

He's on the tense border between Galilee and Samaria; and as He enters a village, He's met by ten lepers. They stand at a distance—they have to. Leprosy is a terribly contagious, terribly deadly disease. Those who contract it are exiled from home, from family and community. They're sentenced to live away from everybody else, outside of cities and villages. In fact, if they see someone coming near to them, they're required to shout that they are lepers from a distance so that others have ample time to avoid them.

So they shout at Jesus from a distance, but not to warn Him off. Instead, they cry, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." They want Him to deliver them. They want Him to have mercy.

But why should He? What is it about them that should move Him to help them?

Is it their ethnicity? It seems a terrible question even to pose in our day and age, but this event took place 2000 years ago, in the area where Galileans and Samaritans went out of their way to avoid each other. It was a popular notion that a Jewish Messiah would come only to save the Jews. If that's the case, why should Jesus help these lepers if at least one of them is a Samaritan?

Is it because they've got a lot to offer in return? Hardly. They've got nothing. They're outside the village, rotting away and waiting to die. There's no satchel of money, no vacation cabin to use, nothing to attract Jesus' help or offer anything in return.

Is it because they've got a huge upside—that Jesus foresees all the good they will do in the future? Again, the answer is no. In fact, as the Son of God, Jesus already knows how ungrateful they'll be—that only one of them will even bother to say thanks once He delivers them.

Is it because they have it worse than everybody else? No. I don't have a misery index for the time, but there are all sorts of people with all sorts of problems. Nor are these the only lepers around. These ten have it bad, but they haven't earned God's help by their suffering.

One more: is it because they make the first move and cry out to Him for help? Some will tell you that it's so. They'll say that the lepers name it and claim it—and that because they demand that Jesus help them, Jesus rewards their audacity. (And if you only believe as much as they did, He will give you whatever you want, too!) But that's not the case, either. We don't have the backstory, but how do the lepers know about Jesus? They know because someone has told them: in other words, they've heard

the Word. And what does the Word do? It gives faith. They only cry out to Jesus because He's already given them faith in the first place. They didn't make the first move—He did.

So what is it about these ten lepers that makes Jesus help them? Nothing. Jesus doesn't help them because of who they are. He helps them because of who He is.

"Who He is" is the Savior. He has come to deliver from sin and all of its wages. Sickness and death are consequences of sin. So are the isolation and loss that these men suffer. To demonstrate His power over sin and to deliver them, Jesus tells them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." There's only one reason why a leper would do that—it's if he were healed and wanted to be readmitted to society. Thus Jesus heals them of their leprosy: His Word sets them free from those wages of sin. Thus Jesus hears their cries and is merciful. Not because of who they are, but because of who He is.

He's more merciful than they know: for all but one, perhaps He's more merciful than they want. Healing from leprosy is a fantastic miracle—they have their lives back! But Jesus has greater gifts to give: He's still going to Jerusalem, still headed to the cross to save them from eternal death and hell. Again, He's not doing this because of who they are, but because of who He is. That's the mercy of the Master.

II. The Lepers and The Lutheran Hymnal

These lepers have a greater tie to you than you might think. Their plea to Jesus is one that you sing practically every week: "Lord, have mercy upon us." With them and with so many others in the Gospels, you cry out for the mercy of the Master.

Now, there's a very, very basic teaching of Christianity here that your sinful flesh wars against. The truth is this, that Jesus is merciful to you solely because of who He is, not because of who you are.

Here's one astounding demonstration of His mercy: health is part of daily bread. As the Small Catechism says, it's part of "everything we need to support this body and life." In the Gospel lesson, Jesus gives health to all ten lepers. When only one of them returns to give thanks, what does Jesus do? Does He take back the health He's given from the other nine? No. Despite their ingratitude, He delights to heal them. Likewise, God "gives daily bread to all, also to all the wicked." He makes the rain fall upon the fields of the just and the unjust. And what happens when people don't give thanks? He gives it to them anyway. What happens if they would refuse their daily bread? He keeps providing. What happens when they give thanks to other gods for what He provides? He keeps giving it anyway, so that they might have more time and life to hear His Word, repent and be saved. That's the mercy of the Master.

He is just as generous and merciful with salvation: He keeps offering faith and forgiveness to all. What if people don't believe it and throw it away? He keeps giving, that they might believe. What happens if they don't give thanks? He makes sure that His Word is still proclaimed to a thankless world. What happens if they look to other gods for the salvation He provides? He keeps sending forth His Word—His saving Word, that they might repent, believe and be saved.

Behold how great His mercy: man thanklessly snatches up the daily bread He provides, thumbs his nose at salvation, yet God keeps giving both anyway.

He doesn't do this because of the goodness of mankind. Man doesn't make the first move. As Romans 3 reminds us, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12).

There's nothing there to earn God's mercy. God isn't merciful because of the goodness of man. He's merciful because, well, because He's merciful and He's promised to show mercy.

The same is true for you, too. God isn't merciful to you because of you, but because of Him—because of Christ. The Lord isn't merciful to you because of your family and ethnic background.

He is not the Savior of certain tribes, nations or families. He is the Savior of all nations, for God so loved the world. You dare not ever think that God is merciful to you because you're an American, because of your proud ethnic heritage or because of the history of your relatives as a strong, church-going family. That is not the reason for God's mercy. It is not you. It is Him.

Neither is the Lord merciful to you because you've got a lot to offer. The Lord doesn't need you. He was God from eternity without us, and He can manage quite nicely on His own. However, He delights to have you as His beloved child, and He delights to make use of you as His instrument to do His work. But He isn't merciful to you because of what you've got to offer in return—after all, everything you've got to offer by way of service, talent and treasure is a gift from Him in the first place. We should add, too, that it's not because you've got a huge upside for the future.

Remember the example of St. Paul: He proved to be quite the apostle after the Lord converted him. But that's not why Jesus had mercy: Paul writes, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16). It wasn't Paul, but Christ's perfect patience and mercy that led to Paul's conversion. Furthermore, the Lord isn't merciful to you because of what you have suffered, because you have it worse than everybody else.

Afflictions can seriously distort your perspective, tempting you to think that you're the greatest of sufferers, or that God is afflicting you until you earn His mercy. But the Lord doesn't deal kindly with you because you've suffered enough. He is merciful to you because He is merciful. Finally, the Lord isn't merciful because you made the first move, reached out and claimed Him as your own.

You didn't make the first move: He did. You were dead in sin, unable to do anything to save yourself or believe in Him. The only reason you cry out, "Lord, have mercy!" is because He's given you the faith to cry out to Him. Like the talents you would use in His service, this faith is also a gift of God to you. Beware of every temptation that would have you think there's something about you that makes God love you. God isn't merciful because of who you are.

We confess this important truth at the start of the service, with words like, "I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee, and justly deserve Thy temporal and eternal punishment." It's not a particularly enjoyable truth, but it is the truth: and once you get past the devastated pride, it's actually a great comfort. See, if God was merciful to you because of you, you could never be sure you'd done enough to deserve His mercy.

You could never be sure that you were American or German Lutheran enough. You could never be sure that you had enough talent to get His attention, or that you'd been committed enough to keep it. Worse yet, you could never be sure that you had suffered enough, or that you believed enough for the Lord to be merciful to you. Such doubts may be far away from you now, but they are the poisonous fruit of assuming that God is merciful because of you. Right now, those assumptions work to blight your faith, to get you to seize glory that belongs rightfully only to Christ. When death draws near, those doubts will terrorize you.

The times that you most realize you need God's mercy will be the times you also know you least deserve it. That is why it is a blessing to confess the truth now: we don't deserve the Lord's mercy. Because we move on from there: with the ten lepers, we sing, "Lord, have mercy upon us." We sing that boldly, without question. See, God has promised to be merciful, and God always keeps His promises. There is no question, no doubt. He says, "No matter who you are—or who you aren't, I have mercy and grace for you. No matter what you've done—or failed to do, I have mercy. No matter how easy or difficult your life has been, I have mercy for you."

You don't have to wonder if God will be merciful. The answer is, yes, He will. He will be merciful to you because it is for the sake of Christ. He will be merciful because the Son of God suffered and died for your sin. He will be merciful because you're washed, sanctified by His blood. He will be merciful because, for Jesus' sake, there is no question about who you are: you're a beloved child of God, and the Father has compassion on His children.

There's no question about what you've done or can do: you are one created to do exactly what God gives you to do. There's no question if you've suffered enough: Jesus suffered enough for all of your sins, so God is merciful to you. We confidently cry, "Lord, have mercy upon us!" There is no doubt: He will have mercy for Jesus' sake; and because Jesus doesn't change, His mercy will not, either.

When Lent rolls around again, we'll sing the hymn "Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain." Verse 2: "Come in poverty and meanness, Come defiled, without, within; From infection and uncleanness, From the leprosy of sin."

Sin is the leprosy shared by all: as the disease is a living death that slowly rots away the body until no life is left, so sin seeks to rot you away until only eternal death awaits. Thus the poverty and meanness, the defilement without and within, the infection and uncleanness. But the hymn doesn't bid you to run away until you've gotten better and deserve God's help. Instead, the verse continues, "Wash your robes and make them white; Ye shall walk with God in light." Because of the cross on that holy mountain of Calvary, your sins are paid for by Christ. He has washed away your sin in your baptism and clothed in the white robe of His righteousness. Because of Christ and His cross, you can be sure that God will always be merciful to you; for because of Christ and His cross, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen