

The Tenth Leper: Is it because I was formerly a leper, and he is worried about catching that horrible disease? Or that he will become ceremonially unclean?

The Young Ruler: I am hesitant be near him...near Simon. I am hesitant for a different reason than you might suppose. It's not because of my wealth. Or my status. Or the fact that he was a leper.

The Tenth Leper: It's uncomfortable being treated like this in public, but I have been completely shunned most of my life, so his hesitation is... (he shrugs it off with a sigh).

I was born with the name, Simon. That was a common name in Israel, and used by many people such as the apostle Simon Peter, Simon the brother of Jesus¹, or Simon the Pharisee. Ironically, the Bible speaks of Simon the Leper from Bethany, whom many believe was either a relative of Lazarus of Bethany, or actually the same person as Lazarus of Bethany². I am certainly not that Simon, because I am a Samaritan.

Being wealthy in my time had several massive advantages, but there were some things that reduced everyone to a level playing field with the poorest people in Samaria and in Israel. None of us had indoor plumbing, we all worshiped at a public place of worship, we all worshiped the same God and were equal in his eyes, oh, and all of us were subject to many of the same health problems. One of the worst of those health problems was leprosy. It seemed to strike the rich and poor indiscriminately. And it was incurable. Getting leprosy was tantamount to receiving a death sentence by slow and painful torture.

But we can all pretty much agree that any time in history, if you have it, leprosy is a horrible disease. It results in horrible skin disfigurement, and causes feeling to be lost in nerves, especially nerves of the extremities. The infection goes unfelt and untreated, so lepers often lose fingers or toes or noses, or even bigger body parts.

My life completely changed the day the priest examined me. In my day, we just knew that people with leprosy had to be kept away from everyone else. We Samaritans and Jews were fortunate, because God had given us specific instructions about identifying leprosy and separating people infected with it. This separation kept it from spreading. That fateful day, the

¹ Mat. 13:55

² Mat. 26:6-13, Mark 14:2-9

priest determined that I was a leper... all of my family's money could not change that, horrifying undeniable fact.

I was rushed to the outskirts of town, wasn't even allowed to go back to my home to gather clothes or money. The priest was kind enough to walk the five miles to my house to tell my father. He was a prominent community figure. He gathered some clothes and food for me, and brought them near to where I was. We shouted to each other from a far distance, and he left my things on the ground. I had to rush to get them, he had to rush away. The tears that my family and I shed in those days. The loneliness and isolation I experienced. Nothing in my life had prepared me for such a hellish thing.

Lepers tended to hang out in groups because we were not banned from being around one another. In fact, we were the embodiment of Paul's phrase, "Here there is no Gentile or Jew."³ Leprosy overcame all other distinctions. In fact, most of the men in my group were Jews, because the Jews in Israel were much tougher on lepers than the Samaritans were. Typically, we were desperately poor, and always hungry. Upon the threat of stoning, we stayed far away from all other people. "Leper, Leper" was what we were required to shout whenever anyone accidentally ventured near. Some of my friends chose suicide, by stoning, to put an end to their miserable lives. The poverty and hunger was...I can't even describe it, but what I really missed most was my family. And friends...their company, the talking, laughing, and the ability to worship God together, as a family... with our community.

Word began spreading through the leper communities that a young prophet in Galilee had miraculous healing powers, even the power to raise people from the dead. If he could do that, surely he could heal a leper or two. The spark of hope was faint, because none of us had the money or physical capability to travel the many miles to Galilee. It was like being trapped in a nightmare where we could almost, but not quite, touch a distant reality of being healthy again.

Hope started to grow from the stony ground of hopelessness. We got word that the young prophet was traveling to Jerusalem, and unlike many of the self-righteous Jews, he was going to take the short-cut through Samaria! We knew the road he would probably take, and the villages he would probably pass through since he had passed through Samaria before. Twelve of us, all men, started stumbling, and hobbling, crawling, anything we could to move toward that road. Only ten of us would finish the journey and when we rounded a corner, we could see him only a stone's throw away.

Spontaneously we started shouting, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us. Jesus, Master, have pity on us. Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" You would be embarrassed to make such a scene, but no force in the world could have stopped us from shouting over and over and over. He stopped... to look at us. Nobody had purposefully looked at us in years.

³ Col. 3:11

“Go, show yourselves to the priest.” (he repeats it, this time he counts words as he goes) “Go, show yourselves to the priest.” Only six words, said quietly by the Master of all diseases, and he turned and continued into the village. May not mean much to you, but those words meant everything to us. Those words meant we were to show ourselves to the priest because he could certify that we were healed of leprosy. But we looked at ourselves, and we were not healed.

One guy took a step toward the synagogue, and he began to transform. And then another guy took a step, and then I took a step. With every step we took, our skin began to...reconstruct, our fingers and toes began to reshape, appear from nowhere, our hair grew longer and thicker. We began to stumble faster, then we could walk, and then we began to run toward the priest's house. Run! I was overwhelmed... with gratitude. The others kept running toward the priest's house. I didn't mean to be disobedient, but I could go to the priest later. I had to thank Jesus and praise God that very moment. I whipped around and went back. To Jesus. I threw myself at his feet, thanking him with my words and tears. Those around Jesus drew back in horror, but he reached down, took my chin and lifted it up.

So quiet, his voice, the crowd strained to hear, He said, “Weren't ten of you cleansed?” He looked down the road where I'd come. “Where are the other nine?” Then louder, “Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” He looked directly into my eyes. “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” As if waking from a nightmare, I rose in relief and joy, and I can't even put it into words, and went to the priest. He examined me, and I was fully healed.

But that is not the end of the story. I started gathering all the information I could about Jesus. With my family's resources, it wasn't hard to do. I began to go throughout Samaria telling people about Jesus and the kingdom of God. In my travels I even found one Samaritan village where every single person already believed in him. I was told their conversion started with a Samaritan woman who gave Jesus some water at a well. Anyway, we worked together to share the word that the Messiah of both the Jews and Gentiles had come. I guess we must have had some effect. A few years later, when Philip the Evangelist arrived, he found it a fairly easy task to convert the Samaritans.

The Young Ruler: So, yes, I am hesitant to sit by Simon. Not because I don't want to be near him. I don't want him to have to be near me. (looks down in sadness) He is cleansed of his leprosy and his sins, but I refused to accept the forgiveness of my sins and therefore, remain unclean.

Like Simon, I was born into a wealthy family. I am called a ruler because my family had long had authority over our village and its surrounding area. As you know, authority often comes with wealth, even if neither is actually deserved. In my case, I wasn't arrogant about being in authority. I was much more concerned with becoming a righteous person. I loved to study the Scriptures and talk about God. I was scrupulous about obeying every law of Moses.

One day, a Pharisee friend of mine told me about a young prophet in Galilee. This prophet was reported to do miracles and explain the Scriptures in a way that no man had ever done. Because I was rich, it was no problem at all to travel and find the prophet. It only took ten days or so to find him. Rather than exert the privileges of wealth, I stayed on the fringe of the crowds that surrounded him.

The little story I heard first, nearly exploded my head. Jesus said, "If your brother or sister sins against you, tell them to stop. If they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and each time come back to you saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive them." So, my days of rule following started going out the window. You know what mattered? My heart, not my rule-following. That was just the beginning. Later, I heard that he expanded the seven times to seventy-seven.⁴

One day, Jesus looked around the crowd and his eyes settled on mine. He began a story that seemed pointed just toward me. He told about a servant who came in from a hard day at work, and then was told by the master to prepare his supper first. To you, that story sounds pretty harsh, but it just seemed normal to me and to the others in the crowd. He followed that with an obvious statement: "Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" Of course not, because as we all knew, that was what servants were supposed to do.

Jesus continued with, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" And then he stopped talking and looked at me. Sadly. He knew that I was incapable of understanding the full lesson he was teaching. I thought he was talking about the Jewish nation, but he was also talking about me.

One day, I could not stand it any longer. I moved to the front of the crowd, where I could stand directly in front of Jesus. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" As the words came out of my mouth, I realized I had been making a life-long assumption. My assumption was this, that eternal life came from what I did.

Jesus seemed to have been waiting for me to come to him. He could tell I was wealthy by my clothes, and most probably well educated. He said, "You know the commandments." He did not ask a question, just made a statement. And I responded in kind, "I have kept all of the commandments since I was young."

"You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give it all to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." His words devastated me, and he knew it. He just looked at me with compassion as my world came apart.

He didn't mean that I lacked *doing* anything, but that I lacked something in who I was. My rule-keeping had not accomplished the goal of making me righteous. Apparently, whatever I lacked

⁴ Mat. 18:22

could only be gained by giving away everything I owned. That was the price, everything. I wouldn't know what I was gaining until after I had given up everything. It seemed I was to gain eternal life, but an eternal life that included abject poverty and a life of being a follower of an itinerant preacher. I tried to quickly weigh the pros and cons, but missed another assumption.

I missed the understanding that my value system was askew. I valued material things on the same plane as spiritual life. Therefore, I could neither understand the meaning of eternal life nor its value. I just stood there. Stunned. Silent.

As if from a far, far distance I heard Jesus say, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God!"

Now it was the crowd's turn to stand in stunned silence. These people envied rich people like me who always had plenty to eat, and who sat in the best places at the synagogue. These people thought I was rich and they were poor because I was more righteous than they were. Their value system was under attack just as much as mine was.

Out of the crowd came a trembling voice. "Who then can be saved?" If the rich cannot be saved, surely the poor have no chance either. And, Jesus replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

The crowd turned to look at me, but I was gone. I went away sad because I had great wealth. Wealth I was not willing to give-up. I was unwilling to give up what would prove to be worthless for that which would prove to be invaluable.

What a devastating evaluation of a man. Unwilling to give up what is worthless for that which is invaluable. A sad, but almost understandable, comment about a young man. However, it is beyond tragic for a man to live his entire life and not change his mind. I haven't yet, and that is why I am ashamed to sit by Simon the Leper. Wouldn't you be ashamed to sit by him, too?