

The One Who Gave Thanks

by the Rev. Grant H. Odhner

Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?” (Luke 17:17).

It's always nice when someone shows appreciation for the things we do. But if even one in ten people did this, we'd probably count ourselves lucky. We accept the fact that most of the time people take what we do for granted. Only occasionally do people really reflect on the positive ways that others affect them and feel (and perhaps show) genuine appreciation. In our story from Luke, when the Lord asked, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?”, perhaps He was drawing attention to this fact of human nature.

Now we may think of the nine lepers who didn't return to give thanks as bad people, but please note, all ten lepers were *cleansed*. All of the Lord's healings were symbolic of the healing of the spirit. The ten lepers stand for people who recognize the wretchedness of their own evils and turn to the Lord for help, those who let Him heal their hearts and lives.

The recognition of one's wretched condition on account of evil is pictured by the lepers standing “afar off” (Luke 17:12). Historically speaking, the lepers stood afar off because many kinds of leprosy were communicable, so they were not permitted to come near others. (If others approached they were obliged to shout, “Unclean! Unclean!”) What a miserable existence! Their disease separated them from human society and from the care and touch of loved ones—separated them from any meaningful work or role in the lives of others.

This terrible affliction aptly pictures the ways in which our evils spiritually separate and isolate us from other human beings. Our evils all have their source in self love. To the extent that love for our self determines our *primary orientation* toward our work and play and relationships, to that extent our spirit is diseased. This disease affects everything we do. One of its effects is that it subtly cuts off the flow of spiritual love and understanding between ourselves and others. Selfishness looks inward and makes us unperceptive of others' real needs—in fact, unperceptive of our own! The lepers' disease not only made it unlawful for them to touch or be touched, it also destroyed their skin, where the sense of touch resides. What a great picture of the insensitivity that evil brings!

In our story the ten lepers “stood afar off” from Jesus, and all ten “lifted up their voices” to cry out for mercy (Luke 17:13). “Lifting up their voices” symbolizes a feeling that wells up in us. There is an affection in us that suffers and grieves, more and more, when we find ourselves being dominated by selfishness. This affection wants to be right with the Lord, to feel concern for others, to live for others. So eventually it despairs and cries out to the Lord for help. This is prayer.

The Lord answered all ten lepers. He told them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests” (Luke 17:14). According to the Law of Moses, lepers who believed that they were healed had to have this confirmed by a priest. The priest would examine them and pronounce them clean or not yet clean. If declared clean, the former lepers were restored to their homes and to human society.

Symbolically “priests” stand for the Lord—for His presence with us, working with us for our

salvation. They represent His love for us, His acceptance of us, His truth and His priorities. Specifically, the lepers submitting themselves to a priest's examination pictures us submitting ourselves to the light of truth, with a recognition of the Lord's desire to heal us.

We are told that "as they went" toward the priests the lepers were cleansed (Luke 17:14). The Lord had told them, "Go..." (*ibid.*). Symbolically, here, He is telling us to *exert effort* in the right direction, to try to *make progress*, to try to *move* toward unselfish love and its truth. And it is in this *effort* that we find ourselves being healed.

Now the miracle worked for all ten lepers. All of them were healed. Yet only one returned to thank the Lord. What does this represent? In the story, the ten lepers actually stand for different elements within a single person. "Ten" often means *all* parts, or the *fullness* of something (think of the Ten Commandments, the Ten Blessings, the ten plagues of Egypt). By contrast, "one" is sometimes symbolic of a *little*, a small part, a fraction. The ten lepers, then, can be viewed as representing *all* the elements in us that the Lord heals or makes "clean" during our regeneration or spiritual rebirth. The one leper who returned to thank the Lord, the Samaritan, pictures our *awareness* of this miracle of restoration.

For every ten things the Lord does for us, we are aware of only one. Actually, the ratio is more like ten trillion to one (if we could even put a number on it). The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church invites us to see that we have little awareness of what is within us. We see only the proverbial "tip of the iceberg." We read in the work *Divine Providence*:

A human being knows nothing whatever about the interior state of his mind...and yet there are infinite things there, not one of which comes to his knowledge. For the internal of a person's thought...is his spirit itself, and in it there are things as infinite or innumerable as there are in his body, and indeed more innumerable.... Now just as a person has no knowledge from any sensation how his mind or soul operates on all things of his body, jointly and singly, so neither does he know how the Lord operates on all things of his mind.... This operation is continual, and the person has no part in it (number 120).

This passage goes on to say that, though we see an evil as a single thing, there are actually infinite things in it. Elsewhere in the Heavenly Doctrine, we read, "every deep-rooted evil, together with its falsities, is interconnected with all other evils and their falsities. Such evils and falsities are countless, and their interconnection is so complex that it cannot be comprehended, not even by angels, only by the Lord" (*Arcana Coelestia* 9336:2). Later in the work, *Divine Providence*, we are told that "There are myriads of lusts that enter into and compose every individual evil.... And these myriads are in such a connected order in the person's interiors that it is not possible to change one without at the same time changing all (number 279:5).

So, when we are working on one evil, the Lord is working on a myriad elements within us. It is this ceaseless inner working that enables us to live and be relatively healthy and happy, as we gradually make efforts that bring about an amazing change of our nature.

A contemporary writer on the subject of spiritual growth (Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled*)

writes of what he guardedly calls “grace.” He observes that when we consider how many things *go right* in the systems of nature and in the human mind, misfortune and disease seem amazingly rare by comparison. The organisms that cause disease are virtually ubiquitous (everywhere) in nature; so are bacteria and fungi. All the forces of decay and decomposition are unceasingly at work on living tissues. And yet, as a rule we thrive. In regard to our spiritual and psychological well-being, life holds so many traumas—more for some people than for others, of course. There are so many evils that touch us and do damage. And yet, most of us are in relatively good mental health. Why?! How can we conclude otherwise than that it is because there is a God, and in His mercy and grace He wills our health; He wills that we be happy; He wills that we turn to Him and be healed, so that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly (see John 10:10).

The Lord does so much for us! We can be aware of so little—either of His goodness or of the evil working within us! And the Lord does not expect us to try to be continually conscious of these things. But He does want us to periodically recognize the extent of our need for Him, so that we welcome His help and healing. The ten lepers who cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Luke 17:13) stand for our perception of our predicament at these moments of insight, and for our desire to be healed. But this perception cannot be sustained. As we go about the business of living, we soon forget these moments of radical insight. We bask in the sphere of the Lord’s grace, without reflecting on it.

Yet in each one of us, there must be a Samaritan who turns back to give thanks to the Lord, who glorifies God and falls down on his face at the Lord’s feet (see Luke 17:15-16). This returning after finding himself healed suggests the need for reflection. (To “re-flect” literally means much the same thing as “to turn back”). When we take the time to reflect on our lives, with an open spirit, we are able to glimpse something of the wonder of the Lord’s love and wisdom at work everywhere. Even then, what we see in our own life may be a comparatively small part of what the Lord actually does for us—just a lone voice out of a host of “lepers” that have found healing—but this lone voice is guaranteed to bring us to our knees, and even right down onto our face, before the Lord of life!

The Lord’s mercies are unceasing, and His miracles are myriad each day! So let us thank Him “for His goodness, and for His wonderful works toward the children of men!” (Psalm 107:8).

“Blessed be the Lord, who daily *loads* us with benefits, the God of our salvation!” (Psalm 68:19).

Amen.

Readings: Luke 17:11-19; *Divine Providence* 120