

“Jesus: a means or the end?” Luke 17:11-19

“On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.

Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.””

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

It is true, every human being, regardless of what they believe, has prayed at some point of their lives. When do we pray? Often it happens when we have no other options left. When we face something that we can’t deal with on our own. When we realize that we are not in control.

Terminal illness, ours or someone else’s. Financial challenges. Loss of income. Crisis in relationships. Dangers for our lives, or lives of our loved ones. Fear. Despair. Pain. Loss. Injustice, and so on and on. People pray when bad things happen.

But that doesn’t immediately make anyone a Christian. However, those situations do reveal something profound about our creaturely nature - we are not all powerful. And they also reveal that the knowledge of God is built into us; when we realize that we are not in control anymore, we cry out for the help of someone more powerful than us.

We read about this encounter between Jesus and the ten lepers. This event helps us to reflect on the differences between these two radically different attitudes toward God. In one of them we see Jesus, or the Triune God simply as a means to our desirable ends, in the other we see Him as the ultimate end. Let’s reflect on our attitude.

“As [Jesus] entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

And as they went... they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. And he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.”

Ten lepers... that's one of those situations that we reflected on earlier. They were sick, they were incurable, they were cast out of their society, doomed till the end of their lives to live in misery, and there was nothing they could do on their own.

They couldn't just pull their lives together; they couldn't men up and get their stuff going. And there was no one else who could help them. But they had heard about this Jesus. That He had the power to heal everyone, and to help everyone.

Maybe He could be their solution? We could say that, yes, that far they were correct. Now Jesus was passing them by. They lifted their voices as loud as they could: "Master, Jesus, have mercy on us, help us, deliver us!"

Imagine how sincere their prayers were! From the depth of their hearts. Their need was real, and the solution suddenly was within their reach. They saw this Jesus, of whom they had heard so much. "Jesus, Master, help us, have mercy on us!"

Jesus had compassion on them and said to them: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." As they went, they were cleansed. Our God is a merciful and gracious God. Abundant in His goodness and care. More than we know. He often hears prayers of those who don't even know Him. He often responds to the outcry of those in despair.

He often grants His help, His healing, His solution, protection, restoration, justice, and so on and so on. Even to those who don't know Him and will not come back to thank Him. For He indeed is God who **"makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."** (Mt 5:45)

But then in this very event we can also clearly see these two different attitudes toward God. **"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. And he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks."**

The nine represent those who only sought for God as a means to their own ends. Their need was real, sure. Their prayers were genuine, of course. Sadly, but the less we are in control, the more genuine our prayers.

Jesus heard their prayers and graciously granted them healing. That was what they wanted. And that was it... They went. They got healed, and none of the nine returned to Jesus. Their attitude led them away from Jesus. Nine out of ten...

We can easily hear disappointment in Jesus' voice: **"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?"** Where are they? And how often do we witness this happening? How often do we see people seeking God's help or gifts only to leave without looking back as soon as they have received what they wanted?

Crisis in life, loss, danger, despair... people cry out for God's help. We pray for them. The good Lord Jesus answers ... never to see them again. Similarly, from time to time we see people asking or demanding baptism, or confirmation, but ... rejecting Jesus.

Asking for church-wedding, but despising the Bride of Christ, the Church. It's funny how many believe that performing the ritual and God somehow will magically protect us as we go on living without Jesus. As if our God was some kind of genie, whom we could manipulate to do our bidding. It is very sad to see it... but how about us?

Why are we here? Are we here because of Jesus, or do we just want something from Him? Perhaps, if we attend the Services our God will grant us what we want. Perhaps, here we can satisfy our social needs. Perhaps that's just an old habit.

Perhaps, if we stick to the Church, there may be some benefit for us. Are we here for Jesus, or are we here mainly for His gifts? Is Jesus mostly a means to our ends, or are we here because the Holy Spirit enables us to love our God more than anything?

This is something only we can answer. I think most of the time it is a bit of both. And, sure, on the one hand we could say that, yes, Jesus most definitely is abundant with His blessings, He has instructed us to turn to God the Father in all our needs and rely on Him in every situation. He delights in caring for His family.

He protects us, He richly blesses us with friends in the community of saints, He knows what we truly need and doesn't hesitate to provide it for us. That's all true and good. But we can also see how different these two attitudes are - seeking God or His gifts.

Perhaps, we can understand it even better if we look at human analogy. Imagine, there is someone whom you love with all your heart, but they come to you and are kind to you only to get what they want. They are not interested in you. They don't care to be with you and to get to know you, or to respond to your love.

They don't want to listen to you. They ignore and despise you and perhaps are somewhat respectful only because they fear you. They mostly care not about you, but about the benefits they may get from you. What sort of relationships would those be?!

That is not what God the Father and Jesus offers to us. That is not what He expects from us. Our God doesn't come to us, because He needs something from us. He doesn't need anything from us. He doesn't need our time or attention.

He doesn't need our moral lives, He doesn't need our donations, He doesn't need anything. Rephrasing what John the Baptist said: "God is able from these stones to create true disciples of Jesus." For our God, you are never a means to the end. For Jesus you are the desirable end. You... yes! You!

Just consider this, He knew you before the creation of the world. He knew you as He was breathing the breath of life into our fore-father Adam. He knew you when He gave the first Gospel promise to Adam and Eve, that He will destroy the power of sin and death and will bring us back to Paradise.

Jesus knew you when He became one of us. When He prayed sweating blood in the garden of Gethsemane. He knew you when He sacrificed His life to be beaten, humiliated and murdered on the cross. You were the end goal of His mission. He did not do all of that looking for some benefits, He did all of that for us, for you!

For Him it was always about us. That's why Jesus was ready to offer His life, when we were still His enemies. This is why He has called you out of this world. This is why He has faithfully walked with you and kept you in true faith. This is why you are still here.

Because for our Triune God you are never a means to something else, you are the ultimate end of His efforts. He knows what He has prepared for you, and He will do all He can, He will give everything so that only He could have you with Him.

When the Holy Spirit persuades us that this is true, then we are transformed like that one, who returned to Jesus. Then we come to Him thirsting for His beauty, hungry to listen to His life-giving words, desiring to dig deeper in His wisdom, overflowing with joy and praise for everything that our God has done and does for us in Jesus.

Then His gifts are not the most important things for us. Then our eyes are fixed on the amazing Giver. Then we gladly invite Him to change our lives, to speak to us and to guide us, so that our praise would help others to see where the true treasure is found.

When that happens, the Holy Spirit makes us like Abraham, and Job and Paul. We are ready to follow our Lord wherever He leads us, to trust Him with everything. Then even amid our troubled lives we can be at peace and marvel at the goodness of our God. Then we can confidently exclaim together with other saints that sufferings of this life are not even worth comparing with the glory that is prepared for us.

We don't know what the future will bring, but we know that at the end, we will be made like Jesus, and we will see Him as He is and will live and reign with Him forever. May we never be so blinded by sin, that we only see God as a means to our ends.

I pray that similarly as we are the ultimate end for our God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit would also help us to love our God with all our heart, and with all our mind and with all our soul, so that we would long for Him and seek for Him all the days of our lives with the same passion as He lives for us.

Amen.