

It might seem to be unfair that Jesus laments that the other nine men didn't come back to thank him after they were healed of their leprosy. After all, it looks like they did what he told them to do. He told them to go to the priests to be examined. This is what God commanded in the Law of Moses. They apparently did what God said to do. In fact, this Samaritan didn't go directly to a priest to be examined. He seems to have disobeyed Jesus' command. So why does Jesus speak as if the rest of them did something wrong for not returning to him? This is because God's favor doesn't come from following his Law. God's favor is received only through faith in his promise of Christ.

Following the directions of the Law isn't by itself something to be praised. It's just what you are supposed to do. These other nine lepers are simply following procedure. You might say "Thank you" to the clerk at the store for handing you your change. You say that, because you are polite, and our Midwestern social etiquette teaches us to say thank you all the time. But is your heart filled with overwhelming joy just because he did what he was supposed to do? Jesus had just explained to his disciples that a master doesn't praise his slave for doing what's expected of him. He says, "When you've done all you were ordered to do, say, 'We are slaves who claim no credit. We've only done our duty.'" So Jesus isn't going to praise these men for doing what the Law required of them. Yet here he draws attention to something much greater than simply following procedure. This man, a Samaritan, a foreigner, has returned to give glory to God. In other words, this man believed in Jesus. His actions demonstrate that he has faith in the promise of Christ. He praised God with all of his voice, and he bowed down to Jesus' feet to give thanks.

Jesus doesn't praise our works. He doesn't praise our attempts to follow the law. Instead, he praises faith. But why? Is this because faith is such a great virtue? No, Jesus praises faith, because faith rests in the promise of God. Faith saves, not because it is so great of a work, but because it receives the gift of forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation given through the work and Word of our Lord Jesus. Faith is created by this promise. Faith therefore rests in this promise and receives everything from this promise. This is why St. Peter can say that our hearts are cleansed by faith. Jesus himself made purification for all our sins. He made us clean by his own blood by taking away our sin and guilt, bearing it in his own pure body on the cross. This is what the whole Bible is about. It is what the Law of Moses pointed toward. And only faith can receive it. Therefore, only faith can produce such joy and thanksgiving toward God.

It was good for the people of Israel to follow the procedures of the Law of Moses. But no matter how many purification rituals they went through, they would remain unclean in their hearts if they couldn't see that Moses was pointing them to Jesus. In Leviticus 13, God told Moses that someone with leprosy should be examined by a priest to see if he has leprosy. If he has leprosy, then the priest should pronounce him to be unclean. If his leprosy has been healed, then the priest should pronounce him clean. Those who are unclean cannot come to the tabernacle to worship God until they are made clean. In a similar way, a woman who had just given birth would remain unclean for a time before her day of purification. Someone who had touched a dead body would remain unclean until the following day. These rituals about being clean and unclean were meant to teach the people about sin and that only God can wash our sins away. This is why Paul calls the Law a tutor that leads us to Christ. Every part of the Law, from its rituals and civil regulations to its directions for everyday life, served to point us to God's promise where he has pledged to be merciful toward us for the sake of his holy name.

The Law was given to teach about sin and repentance. It does this by telling us what God's will is for our lives – that we should love him with our whole hearts and our neighbors as ourselves, that we should give generously, live a chaste life, and protect our neighbor's property and reputation. As we learn God's will for our lives we also learn how much we fall short and how much we need a Savior from sin. But God wanted to make sure that his people Israel learned this message clearly. This is why he added certain object lessons and rituals for his people to follow. Of course, it wasn't sinful to have leprosy or to touch a dead body or to give birth to a child. Yet, God added these rituals and requirements of purification to teach the people that we need to be washed and cleansed by him in everything that we do. Those who treated these rituals like hoops to jump through, without recognizing the promise of the cleansing blood of Christ, were missing the entire point of the rituals.

These rituals could only make someone outwardly clean. In the same way, if you never kill someone, never engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage, never shoplift or spread evil rumors, then this makes you outwardly righteous. But the Law can never make you clean and righteous before God. It was good for the lepers to go to the priests, just like it's good for you to come to church. But don't be mistaken. It's your duty to be here. God doesn't owe you praise for doing what you were supposed to be doing anyway.

These purification rituals were meant to point the people to Jesus. And now they have served their purpose. Christ has already come. The shadows and object lessons are no longer necessary, because the substance of God's salvation has been revealed in his Son. Now, any purpose the law has is simply to love your neighbor and glorify God. God no longer requires women who just gave birth to go through a procedure of being unclean before they are pronounced clean. God no longer forbids eating certain kinds of food. Jesus has made all things clean. But if you give your wife a break for a while after she gives birth, then that's certainly a good thing. Meanwhile, you have the gift of life and salvation for you, your wife, and your children by your baptism into Christ. If you avoid eating or drinking something in front of certain people, because it might be confusing to them, then that's certainly a good thing as well. Meanwhile, Jesus gives you food that will never perish and water that will never dry up. But the law is not fulfilled by making more rules for ourselves. The law is fulfilled by love flowing from faith in the promise. When you remain faithful to your spouse, when you help your neighbor in need, and when you sing praises to God, this is not just a procedure. It must be driven by love flowing from a heart of faith in Christ.

So let's return to the question about whether this one Samaritan disobeyed Jesus. Now, it may be that after he returned to give thanks to Jesus he then went and found a priest to examine him. But that isn't the point. Whether he did that or not isn't nearly as important as what Jesus is teaching. You see, when Jesus told them to show themselves to the priests, he was speaking the words of Moses. And Moses spoke these words to point people to Jesus. Jesus is the true priest who gave himself as the perfect sacrifice to wash us clean of our sins. Jesus is the true priest who pleads for us at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is the true priest who sprinkles us with his own blood, gives us eternal food, and clothes us with his own innocence. When the man returned to praise God and bow before his Son, he was embracing something much greater than a shadow of the good things to come. He was embracing Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, to whom Moses and all the prophets bore witness.

Our Lord laments that the other nine men didn't come back to give praise to God. All ten of them called out to Jesus. All of them called Jesus Master. All of them begged for mercy. But only one of them came

back and thanked him. The other nine recognized Jesus as a great man. The other nine recognized him as a great teacher. The other nine saw Jesus as someone who could help them. But they couldn't recognize him as the source of all good things. They didn't see him as the fulfillment of these words of Moses.

Instead of looking down on these nine men, we should examine ourselves. After all, it's easy to lose sight of the one thing needful when we are suffering pain and sadness, or when we are left out of the joys of everyday life. The best people know to ask God for help when they are hungry, when they are lonely, or when they are in danger. But faith does much more than ask Jesus for relief from our problems. Faith embraces Jesus and holds onto him as its one and only prized possession. The point of this account is not for us to follow the procedure of the Samaritan while looking down on the procedure followed by the other nine lepers. No, the point of this account is to teach us that only faith in the promise can give us true and lasting joy. Only faith can truly make us well in our heart and conscience. Only faith can save us. Giving thanks to God is not something we can manufacture. Sure, saying thank you and writing thank you notes are good habits to get into. But true thanksgiving cannot come about by our own methods and works. Thanksgiving toward God comes only through faith in his Son. This is why Jesus says, "Get up and go! Your faith made you well." Or to translate it a different way, "Your faith has saved you."

Jesus tells the man to get up and go. Go where? Go and live your life. Go and give thanks to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do your duty. Do what is expected of you. But find God's favor only in his promise of his Son. Find God's approval only through faith in your gracious Lord who was eternally approved as our faithful High Priest. Go on your way, the way that God has prepared for you. And have this confidence: your faith has saved you through the merits of Jesus Christ. Amen.