

# ***LEPERS, SAMARITANS AND GRATITUDE***

**January 18, 2009**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Luke**  
**Revision D**

## **GOSPEL: Luke 17:12-19**

In the Western Church in the United States, today's Gospel lesson is used for the U.S. holiday of Thanksgiving Day. The Eastern Church does not celebrate Thanksgiving Day as a Feast Day. The Gospel lesson is the account of the ten lepers that were healed by Jesus; where one was a Samaritan. To get a better understanding of the circumstances, let us look at the Mosaic Law regarding leprosy and at the history of the Samaritan people up to the first century.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Leprosy, According to Mosaic Law**

Diagnosis: The priest was given the task of diagnosing whether an infection was leprosy or benign (Leviticus 13:1-3). In addition, the priest also diagnosed leprosy arising from boils on the skin and from skin burns, whether it occurs on bare skin or in a person's hair (Leviticus 13:4-46). Clothing also was brought to the priest for inspection and diagnosis; if the clothing had leprosy that was spreading, the clothing had to be burned (Leviticus 13:47-59).

The Life of a Leper: Lepers were required to live alone or separated from society, outside the camp. His (or her) clothing was to be torn (as in a state of mourning); he had to keep his head uncovered and his mustache covered. Whenever non-lepers came along, the leper was required to say, "Unclean! Unclean!" to warn the non-lepers to stay away (Leviticus 13:45-46).

Purification of a Leper: When a leper was cleansed or healed, he needed to show himself to a priest for verification. The priest then met the leper outside the camp and checked him over (Leviticus 14:1-3). If the leper was indeed healed, a series of offerings were performed involving two live birds. One bird was killed over running water and the other bird was dipped in the bloody water and then released. The leper was sprinkled seven times with the bloody water (Leviticus 14:4-8).

Following this, the leper was shaved of all body hair, including his eyebrows, and then, bathed. Eight days later, he was required to offer another offering involving three lambs (two males, one ewe) plus flour and oil. Only after all this could the leper return to normal society (Leviticus 14:9-32).

### **Who Were the Samaritans?**

Samaria was part of the Northern Kingdom that was led into captivity by the Assyrians in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The ten tribes representing the Northern Kingdom had been given to Jeroboam, Solomon's servant, because of idolatry in Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:26-36). Jeroboam,

in turn, made two golden calves saying that these were the ones that brought Israel out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:26-29). Archaeological research suggests that these golden calves were intended as supports for the invisible Presence of the Lord. Baal, for example, was commonly portrayed in 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Century BC iconography as enthroned on the back of a bull or other animal.

The Samaritan people initially were Jews of the ten tribes, but the Assyrian conquerors sent bands of people from other nations into that area in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries BC to make up for Jews taken away captive. As the people of that area intermarried, the Samaritans came to be racially mixed. However, the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses representing the Law) was well known in Samaria. Jeroboam tried to copy the worship in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:32) in at least some aspects. People in the Northern Kingdom were familiar with the Ark of the Covenant due to its resting place at Shiloh (located within the borders of the Northern Kingdom) prior to Solomon's Temple.

By the time of Ezra (c. 520 BC), the residents of Samaria were referred to as the enemies of the reconstruction (Ezra 4:1-2). The Samaritans claimed to be seeking the same God as the Southern Kingdom, but Zerubbabel and Ezra didn't buy it.

In about 409 BC, Manasseh, the brother of Jaddua the high priest, was expelled from the Southern Kingdom by Nehemiah for an unlawful marriage to a foreign woman. Manasseh's wealthy father-in-law, Sanballat, obtained permission from Darius, the last Persian king, to build a temple on Mt. Gerizim very much like the temple in Jerusalem. Sanballat then set his son-in-law, Manasseh, up as high priest on Mt. Gerizim and persuaded other priests in Jerusalem with foreign wives to join him. [Leviticus 21 required the high priest to avoid foreign wives, but not specifically the other priests. In Ezra 10:9-19 this injunction was extended to all the priests]. For more details, see Josephus Antiquities of the Jews, Book xi.

Thus the Samaritans imitated the worship in Jerusalem. When persecution came, however, the worship of Mt. Gerizim changed. For example, in about 167 BC, Antiochus captured Jerusalem, pillaged the Temple and offered swine on the altar. Judas Maccabaeus then led a revolt to drive out Antiochus and purify the Temple. Before the Maccabee revolt, the Samaritans sent envoys to Antiochus (a Greek) offering to change the name of their Temple to the Temple of Jupiter and claiming that they were Persians, not Jews (thus hoping Antiochus would not pillage their Temple also). This merely added to the disgust the Jews in Jerusalem had for the worship on Mt. Gerizim. For more details, see Josephus, Antiquities, xii, 5.

By 125 BC, Josephus stated that the Temple on Mt. Gerizim had fallen into disuse and was deserted. Shortly thereafter, Hyrcanus came through with his army and demolished Samaria and the Temple on Mt. Gerizim. Josephus, Antiquities, xiii, 9:1, 10:1-2.

Later during the time of the Maccabees (167 to 63 BC), the Temple on Mt. Gerizim was rebuilt. Since the Maccabees controlled Samaria during this time, the Samaritans developed a zealous devotion to the Jewish Law. During the reign of Herod I, Samaria was refortified as a city and a great Temple was constructed within the city walls. Mt. Gerizim, five miles to the Southeast of Samaria, continued to be considered a sacred place. See Josephus, Antiquities, xiii, 15:4; xiv, 5:3; xv, 8:5. Also Unger, Bible Dictionary, p. 960.

Mt. Gerizim and the adjacent peak of Mt Ebal were both about 2500 ft. high and located in the center of Israel. Together they formed a part of an unusual liturgy performed by Joshua at the time of the Conquest (Deuteronomy 27:12-25, Joshua 8:30-35).

On Mt. Ebal the Law was painted on stone as an icon and as a curse for those who refuse to keep it (Deuteronomy 27:2-4). Cyprian stated that the stones on which the Law was written represent Christ, the Lawgiver (Treatises XII, iii, 16). As references he cited, “Thus says the Lord, Behold, I place on the foundations of Zion a precious stone, elect, chief, a corner stone, honorable; and he who trusts in Him shall not be confounded” (Isaiah 28:16). “The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner. This is done by the Lord, and it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day, which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. O Lord, save therefore, O Lord, direct therefore. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 118:22-25).

The blessings and the curses were given very dramatic prominence following the Conquest and in a liturgical fashion (Deuteronomy 27:12-26). Since “those who are of faith are blessed with the believing Abraham” (Galatians 3:9), the blessing on Mt. Gerizim represents the blessing Abraham received for loving God and neighbor (Genesis 15:6). Mt. Gerizim continued to stand for holiness to the Samaritans. Photini, the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar, a town which was at the foot of Mt. Gerizim (John 4:7-9), considered Mt. Gerizim more proper than Jerusalem (John 4: 19-24). On the other hand, “the Law is not made for a righteous person” (1 Timothy 1:9), and “as many as are of the works of the Law are under the curse” (Galatians 3:10, Deuteronomy 27:26). In His answer to Photini regarding Mt. Gerizim, Jesus spoke of true worship in spirit and truth – elsewhere.

The curse on Mt. Ebal represents what those who refuse to love God and neighbor can expect to receive after being reminded by the Law their entire life about what God expects, and yet refusing to obey. Just to show the love of God for His people, Christ Himself became the curse that was proclaimed on Mt. Ebal in becoming sin and taking away the sin of the world (Galatians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:21). Tertullian referred to the blessing and the curse as good and evil. “Behold”, says the Lord, “I have set before you good and evil. Choose that which is good. If you cannot because you will not (for that you can if you will He has shown, because He has proposed each to your free-will) then you ought to depart from Him whose will you do not do” (On Monogamy, xiv).

Jesus had several other contacts with Samaritans during His three-year public ministry. For example, James and John, the sons of thunder as Jesus called them, (Mark 3:17) proposed calling down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village that did not receive them (Luke 9:51-56) just as Elijah did. That Jesus was in Samaria at all is note worthy, since Jews usually traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem via the East side of the Jordan so they could avoid all contact with Samaritans.

## **THE GOSPEL LESSON: Luke 17:11-19**

Per Jesus' custom, he did not go from Galilee to Jerusalem by crossing over to the East side of the Jordan, but went right through Samaria. In one village there were ten lepers, and one was a Samaritan. Perhaps their quarantine and mutual misery drew them together.

Where was this village located, Galilee, Samaria, or Judea? The text doesn't say. Since Jesus referred to the Samaritan as a foreigner or stranger (v.18), the implication is that the village was in Galilee, perhaps near the border with Samaria. Cyril of Alexandria (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Century) interprets it this way also (Commentary on Luke, Chapter 17).

The lepers seemed to know who Jesus was, yet they kept their distance in obedience to the Mosaic Law. The text doesn't mention them crying out "Unclean! Unclean!" as required by the Mosaic Law, but they probably did this at first. As we do often in the Liturgy, they cried out, "Have mercy on us!" the first thing Jesus said was, "Go show yourselves to the priests." As they went to show themselves to the priests, they were healed. Given that Samaritans were despised by Jews, we can only wonder whether the Samaritan leper could find a priest that would even stoop to look at his condition, never mind perform all the sacrifices required by the Mosaic Law. The Samaritan, perhaps realizing this and knowing that it was a Jew who healed him, returned and glorified God with a *LOUD VOICE*, falling down at Jesus' feet.

The healing process here can be summarized by three words: cleansed (v.14), healed (v.15) and made well (v.19). The nine were cleansed and healed but not made well because they forgot to express their gratitude. They were satisfied too early with too little. From this we understand that faith and thanksgiving have a connection, where faith is the substance of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1). The substance is baptism and its results.

Cyril comments on this as follows, "And why did (Jesus) not rather say, 'I will, be cleansed', as He did in the case of another leper (Matthew 8:2) but commanded them rather to show themselves to the priests? He commanded them to go, as if being already healed, that they might bear witness to the priests, as the rulers of the Jews and ever envious of His glory, that wonderfully and beyond their hope, they had been delivered from their misfortune by Christ's willing that they should be healed" (Ibid.). This occurred in 30 AD as Jesus headed for Jerusalem and the Cross (Luke 17:11, 18:31-33). A little over a year later (Pentecost, 31 AD), a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the Faith (Acts 6:7).

In a way we are all lepers to some extent, and the image of leprosy has been applied especially to heresy in the Church, because it is so contagious and destructive. Heretics have been cut off from the Church in ages past to avoid the leprous effect of their teaching.

When Jesus sent all ten lepers to show themselves to the priests, they still had the leprosy. Since they were cleansed enroute, Jesus expected (and common courtesy would also dictate) that they should return to express their gratitude before going through the eight-day purification required by the Mosaic Law. This can be a lesson for us, also. Have we ever been given a gift from the Lord, where we know it's His Will that we pursue this gift, but yet forget to take time out from our busy schedule to say thanks?