

*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us! Amen.*

You're sitting across the table from a friend who feels like God is a million miles away. She lost her job. Her checking account is empty. She wrecked her car, her husband died in the crash, and her family disowned her for it.

What do you say? Where's the silver lining? "Hey, cheer up, it's not so bad. At least you're not dead."

Probably should not say that. You can do better. Instead of telling troubled people that they can always find something to be thankful for, remind them that you can be thankful for everything, including your troubles, because you can always be **thankful for mercy**.

Consider these ten guys. They don't have much to be thankful for. They're lepers. Lepers have leprosy. A disease that rots the flesh. It's horrible. Skin being eaten away. Nerves go numb. Pieces of face, hands, feet rot off. The body just decomposes while you watch. If you told them, "Hey, cheer up, at least you're not dead," they would say, "Yet." Lepers are the living dead.

If you have leprosy, you are isolated. Leviticus has a full chapter of laws about lepers and how they belong outside the city and away from the people. Lepers yell, "Unclean! Unclean!" if anyone gets too close (Leviticus 13:45-46). No family, no friends, no cure. Lepers don't have a much to be thankful for.

But these ten have two things going for them: One, Jesus is **on his way to Jerusalem (17:11)**, traveling near them. Two, leprosy hasn't destroyed their vocal cords yet. So **they stood at a distance<sup>13</sup> and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (17:12-13)**.

Did you catch that? **At a distance (17:12)**. Those three words sum up everything you need to know about leprosy. If you're a leper, you're at a distance. Dying skin puts normal life at a distance; isolation puts friends and family at a distance.

But don't those three words also sum up how you feel about God sometimes? You probably don't know what it's like to have a contagious and deadly skin disease, but everyone has days when it feels like God is at a distance.

A disaster sinks your dream. A disability ruins your quality of life. You're benched during the big game, shunned by your friends, forgotten in your final years; your spouse has checked out or your parents just don't get you.

And where is God during all this? He's, like, a million miles away hanging out with the happy and the healthy. Sometimes you can't trust God for anything but making life miserable.

We suffer. We struggle. And then we ask, "Why me?" as if it's unfair that we have to suffer. But the more accurate question is, "Why not me?" You're just as sinful as everyone else. So am I.

But we forget that; we forget the reality of our condition. That's one thing lepers cannot do – forget the reality of their condition. Their isolation is a constant reminder that they are going to die and until they die they are a threat to the healthy.

But the lepers' isolation reminds us of something too. God designed his leprosy laws to not only protect the healthy, but to also teach the reality of the human condition. Lepers are walking object lessons about sin. Like leprosy, sin kills you. Like leprosy, sin separates and isolates you – from God (Isaiah 59:2).

That's the problem we have, sin. But way too often, you forget your problem and let your sinful nature convince you that you deserve to be close to God.

You don't believe what the Bible reveals about you – that you are by nature sinful and that you deserve misery today and hell forever when you die (Luke 12:5). Instead, you believe what your sinful nature reveals about you – that you are decent and hardworking; your family has always gone to church; you've got so much to offer God; and you've already suffered so much, that who is God to treat you like an outcast?

But if you believe that, if you allow your sinful nature to control you, then you really are an outcast. Jesus describes the place outcasts go as being "thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). Isolation. The pain of leprosy, your personal sufferings – they don't even begin to compare to the torments of hell. And that's what you deserve for your sin. Me too.

But hey, cheer up. At least we're not dead ... yet.

There is a solution to this problem. Like the ten lepers, we have to face the reality of our situation. Look at what they ask for. **"Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (17:13)**.

They know what they deserve. They know they're outcasts with nothing to offer Jesus. They know Jesus should pass by and do nothing. They're out of options, so they do the only thing they can – cry out for mercy. Mercy is love for the un-loveable. A cry for mercy is a cry that says, "Please, don't treat us the way we deserve."

You're out of options too. Be honest about who you are. Confess that you have disobeyed God in your thoughts, words, and actions. Admit that you deserve his punishment now and in eternity. Pray, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." In other words, "Lord, don't treat me the way my sins deserve."

And he doesn't. Look again at the first verse. **Now on his way to Jerusalem (17:11)**. Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Turns out, God is not so far away after all. In fact, God is near, like, on-his-way-to-Jerusalem near.

God did not stay in heaven, at a distance from us. He became one of us! Jesus entered our world of pain when he was born in Bethlehem. Jesus chose to live a life where "he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). He knows the pain of sadness, betrayal, and misery.

And, he knows the pain of isolation. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and its cross. On the cross, Jesus is an outcast from his Father, so that you will enjoy his presence forever. On the cross, Jesus is separated from God so that your sins will never separate you from God. And when Jesus rises from death, he keeps the scars on his body, proof that our God is "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Isaiah 53:3).

Whenever pain makes you question where God is, look at the cross. If God were at a distance, he wouldn't have given his only Son for you. If God didn't care, he wouldn't have suffered such bad things for you. You never have to ask if God loves you. The cross proves it (Romans 5:8).

Your troubles prove it too. Think about it. Human beings will not, by nature, plead for God's mercy. So God allows bad things to happen. He lets you be infected with loneliness and hopelessness and illness and aggravations so that you have to cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!"

He lets you feel guilty. He lets you make bad decisions. He lets you get hurt. Why? The apostle Paul once gave this explanation for why bad things happen: "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9). Troubles teach us to rely on God.

All your troubles help you see what you would never see without them: Your constant and desperate need for Jesus' mercy. You trust him to save you from the trouble of hell; now trust him to save you from the troubles of life.

He deserves your trust. Notice what Jesus says to the lepers: **"Go, show yourselves to the priests" (17:14)**. These are words of promise. Only cured lepers can go to the priests, because it's their job to confirm when lepers are healed (Leviticus 14:1-32). These lepers have no evidence that they are better. But because they trust Jesus, they do what he says.

Their trust is not misplaced: **And as they went, they were cleansed (17:14)**. Flesh restored. Faces in one piece. Feeling returns. Fingers and hands, toes and feet in normal working order! They can go to their families. No more isolation. Jesus rescues them from living death.

That is why God recorded this miracle in Scripture. He wants you to know that you can trust him to be merciful. Jesus doesn't turn away from anyone – not you, not even the ten lepers.

And what do they do with Jesus' mercy? They take it and run. They go to the priests and get on with their lives. Nine of them don't even remember to say, "Thank you, Jesus" **(17:15-19)**.

Don't you do that too? Life drives you to your knees, begging for relief. The Master has mercy and fixes your situation. And you return to life as normal without returning to Jesus to give thanks.

So here is another reason God recorded this miracle in Scripture – a reminder to be **thankful for mercy**. You are the beneficiary of miracles far greater than cleansing from leprosy. The miracles of Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter come together to cleanse you from sin. Washed clean in baptism, fed in Holy Communion, you are given the greatest gift of all, the gift of faith in Jesus.

So when life is tough, don't just think, "Well, at least I'm not dead." Thank Jesus for the mercy of being close during trouble. When you're restored, don't just go back to life as usual. Thank Jesus for having mercy on you. Amen.