

## Nine Ways to Say “No Thanks”

By Pastor Esther F. Ramharacksingh Knott

Theme: Suggested Call to Worship:

Primary Bible text: Luke 17:11-19, RSV

Opening Song: Praise to the Lord, #1

Praise Him, Praise Him, #249

Closing Song: Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine, #462

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*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 and said, "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 the, 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 said Jesus, "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." Luke 17:11-19 (RSV)*

Luke is a wonderful book—full of parables and miracles. Everyone likes a good miracle. As children we waited eagerly for the ending of the Bible stories, knowing that with Jesus there everything would turn out all right. Here, in chapter 17, Luke records not just a single miracle, but a whole bunch, all at one time.

Ten men stood at a distance and cried, "Jesus, Master, have mercy/pity on us!" This caught His attention, He took one look, diagnosed their condition and prescribed the cure. What a physician! Just think of all the money we'd save if doctors today could diagnose an illness so easily. How did Jesus recognize their illness? Oh, I know, you'll say, "He's God and He knows everything." And of course that is true, but aside from His divine powers, He probably recognized their disease the same way our doctors would today. All that was needed was one look.

We don't hear much about leprosy today even though it continues to exist in many parts of the world, including the southern part of the United States. A friend of mine, John Sturgis, recently got back from a Maranatha trip to Zambia, where he visited a leper colony. Since I don't know much about leprosy, I called him for some information. John is a physician. So, naturally he used a lot of big, technical words like Dapsone and myco bacterium leprae. So, of course, I responded with a lot of knowledgeable comments like "u-huh" and "I see." Nevertheless, he shared a moving story.

He said the colony was a ghostly place. It was hard not to get nauseated. Leprosy is a very disfiguring disease and in the advanced stages it is a terrible sight. It is a bacterial infection that invades the nerves and kills them. As a result, the victims feel nothing, even when a rat comes to nibble on an ear, or nose, in the middle of the night. John saw many people whose noses had been entirely eaten away.

Their feet have lost all sensitivity so they feel nothing when the flesh on their bare feet gets torn off on a long walk. They don't know when to stop. They feel nothing when they gash themselves with a machete while working in a nearby cane field. They feel nothing when their eyes dry up leaving them blind. They lose their voice, they lose their hearing. They dislocate their joints. All while feeling nothing.

In Christ's day it was known as a living death. We can only imagine the pitiful picture the ten lepers presented.

Jesus saw not only the physical torture but the mental anguish. Leprosy was viewed as a curse, brought about because of sin in the person's life. (It's a wonder they didn't all have leprosy.) Leviticus 13 describes the whole process one had to go through if suspected of having leprosy-- the process of the symptoms, the quarantine, and then the shame of the dreadful pronouncement by the priests. And as if the suffering weren't enough, they were forced to endure segregation. They were sent from their homes and society. And if that weren't enough, when someone approached they were to cover their lips and cry "unclean, unclean."

Such sad words. Leprosy is a fitting symbol for our sin. We caught the sin-disease by accident of birth. We need to see its awfulness and ugliness, the distortion it has brought to God's creation and His plan for our lives. Sin defies human remedies, just as leprosy did in Jesus' time. Sin has gained possession of us. We too sometimes feel nothing, we have become insensitive to the needs and social concerns around us, the injustices. We don't want to get involved.

Recently, someone set up an appointment to visit me in the office. When I discovered that it concerned a case of child sexual abuse, my initial reaction was that I didn't want to get involved. Things could get complicated. It could involve court and take a lot of time. Then I realized that somewhere there was a helpless six year old girl who needed others to speak for her. This was a social concern and I needed to be sensitive and horrified by the situation. Horrified enough to act and not let sin dull my sensibilities. It might be easy to hear the story and feel nothing, or even worse, do nothing.

As with leprosy, our noses, our fingers, our eyes, our tongues exhibit the ways in which sin has possessed our lives.

People use their noses to snort cocaine. And to use a common metaphor, we nose into other people's business. You may say, "Oh, my nose doesn't get me into trouble." Well if your Thanksgiving and Christmas were like mine, you'll probably have to admit that you were tempted into overindulgence by the delicious smells that came wafting from the kitchen. How many pieces of pumpkin pie, and pecan pie, and blueberry pie, and apple pie did you have? At one meal.

Our fingers and hands have touched what they shouldn't. We've stolen and cheated and inflicted pain. Child abuse and spouse abuse.

Our eyes have willingly beheld all manner of evil from what we choose to watch for

entertainment, to what we read.

Our tongues have been involved in gossip and criticism. Remember the little chant you may have learned in grade school? It was the retort we were supposed to use when someone called us unkind names: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It's fine to think that you'll try not to let the bad things other people say about you hurt you. But if you think your words won't hurt somebody else, then that's a lie. Your words do hurt. Children, will you remember that when you're out on the play ground; when you're having a quarrel with your brother or sister? Parents and adults, will you remember than when you are angry with one another or with your child? Words can hurt and continue to hurt when physical wounds are long forgotten.

Sometimes we talk too much and sometimes we remain silent when we should speak.

Leprosy--the living death. We are dead in sin.

Our clothes are torn rags. We are outcasts--sent away from our heavenly home. Separated from our heavenly family.

Sin—a bleak picture. And so it was a bleak picture for the lepers that day as they trespassed into the village. It was a bleak picture UNTIL—until they met Jesus. This is the turn in the story, the part we have been waiting for. The Central Character of the gospels comes face to face with not just a sinner, but a group of sinners, even a whole congregation.

They cried, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." What else could they cry? They had nothing to offer but their torn rags and broken bodies.

He said to them, (vs. 14) "Go and show yourselves unto the priests." The law of Moses required it (Mark 1:44). The man in Mark had already been healed before he was sent to the priests. Luke records that our 10 lepers were healed as they went. What faith these men had. They trusted and obeyed. In a world that says "seeing is believing," Jesus says, "Blessed are those who do not see but yet believe."

This could be the happy ending of the story that we always wait for, but it isn't. The story continues with an insight into how God likes stories of His blessings to end.

Scripture records that, one man, seeing that he was healed returned to Jesus, threw himself at His feet, and thanked Him. We know this was important to Jesus because He asked, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Here is evidence that it matters to God whether we appreciate the good things we receive from Him. It made a difference in the life of the leper who came back. Jesus said, "Thy faith hath made thee whole." Jesus was referring to the whole person. The others had received physical healing but only one returned, knew Who to thank, and received the spiritual healing.

Where were the nine? They were good men. They had also believed. They had been healed. They were probably in synagogue the next Sabbath. And they probably all had "legitimate"

reasons for not saying thank you.

While in college at Andrews University, I attended a dorm worship where we were divided into groups and were asked to compile a list of so called "legitimate" reasons why the nine never returned to say thank you. Here they are--Nine Ways to Say "No Thanks":

- 1) Always followed the letter of the law. Jesus said he should go to the priest. So he would do just that and nothing more.
- 2) Going through an identity crisis. He'd been a leper so long. What would he do now? His life would drastically change. He was so preoccupied with the change he forgot.
- 3) This one believed that you are supposed to work for what you get, yet he hadn't worked for this and so couldn't handle the situation.
- 4) He was so happy he became delirious.
- 5) May have become bitter in the past because he was driven to become a beggar. He vowed he would never say thank you to anyone.
- 6) He was a family man. Anxious and eager to get back to his family, to hold his wife and hug his children.
- 7) Skeptic—doubted whether Jesus really has anything to do with it. After all, he hadn't been healed in Jesus' presence. Maybe it was something in the air that day.
- 8) So excited about the totality of the Christian message and that Jesus was the Messiah, he had no time to return to Jesus. He was out telling the good news.
- 9) Listen carefully to this next one. Procrastination. Tomorrow he would return and thank Jesus.

Which leper are you?

What "legitimate" things in our lives are keeping us from returning to the feet of Jesus to acknowledge Him as the Healer of our souls?

God's blessings fall on the good and the bad. The difference is that the Christian knows who to thank. God's gifts are taken for granted if we don't know who's responsible for the blessings. A poster held the following caption: "Peace is seeing a beautiful sunset and knowing who to thank." We know Who's responsible.

We must offer our thanks to God. Learn to count our blessings. If you're having a hard time figuring out what your blessings are, play this little game we played as children. On a sheet of paper write out the letters of the alphabet in a column down the left margin. Then beside each letter write at least one thing you're thankful for that begins with that letter.

Just this morning, only moments ago, we did this little exercise with own Primary Sabbath School class. Here's what some of the children are thankful for:

[Presenter – it would be good to do this before the sermon with the children in your church, using your own language and alphabet if you are in a non-English area.]

A--angels, animals  
B--baseball, Bible and boys  
C--cats, cereal  
D--Daddy, dinner, dog,and Dodgers  
E--elections, earth, Epcot  
F--food, father, forgiveness  
G--giant lollipops, God, and goats  
H--hot water, heaven, Heath Bars, and home  
I--ice cream, Indians, igloos  
J--Jesus, jokes, Jaguars, Juicy Fruit gum  
K--Kelloggs, kittens, kites, kindness  
L--Lakers, life, love, lions  
M--mother, money, and me  
N--nurses, nuts, Nintendo  
O--outdoors, operating rooms, occupations  
P--parents, peanut butter, and pickles  
Q--quarters, quietness, and Q-tips  
R--rabbits, raisins, Ryan  
S--sisters, stickers, and sailboats  
T--togetherness, teeth, teachers  
U--umbrellas, universe, Uno, and us  
V--vacation, verbs, and vegetables  
W--water, world, women, Washington  
X--x-ray, xylophone, xerox  
Y--Yankees, yellow, and you  
Z--zebra and zippers

I believe God wants us to return thanks to Him not just because He deserves it, but because it makes us feel good. Praise is a cure for depression.

How much brighter our daily lives would be if there were more praise and gratitude expressed. It is good that we never expect gratitude, but let us not leave those around us wanting for it.

One leper came back. He received the true blessing. We are all sinners. The blessings of God fall on all, but eternal life only on those who express gratitude. We don't have gratitude in our hearts on our own. Christ came to give it to us. Even in this story we are told Jesus was passing through the midst of Samaria and Galilee, He was going to Jerusalem, and there He would be crucified. For you, for me.

The lepers cried out for mercy and they were healed. We cry out for mercy and God saves.

God saw us from a distance, from the courts of heaven. And God became flesh and lived among us.

It is a desperate condition that we find ourselves in...UNTIL. There's that magic word again--until. Until we meet Jesus. When we do we become new. We are fit to show ourselves to God, to return to our heavenly home. And be with our heavenly family.

I invite you to meet Jesus. BUT not just one meeting like the nine. The back of a business card says, "If we met and you forget me you have lost nothing, but if you meet Jesus Christ and forget Him, you have lost everything."

I asked my friend John, the one who had visited the leper colony, if there was a cure for leprosy. He said yes and no. One of the reasons for the colony is so that the lepers can be treated with antibiotics. Regularly they have to go to the clinic to get their medicine. This is a process that will continue for the rest of their lives. Meeting Jesus is a process that will continue for the rest of our lives. We can't just meet Jesus once. We can't just be baptized and think that is the end of it. We must continually meet Him and get daily doses of that which gives us life.

How will your story end? Will it be the happy ending that all of heaven longs for? Can you sing "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine?" This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.

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**Biographical Information on the Sermon Writer:** Pastor Esther (Ramharacksingh) Knott is associate pastor at Pioneer Memorial Church on the Campus of Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. She has been a pastor for 19 years serving in Illinois, Michigan, and Maryland. Esther is a frequent speaker for women's retreats across North America. Ron and Esther have been married for 14 years and are parents to 10-year-old Olivia. Both of these blessings remind Esther that she has so much for which to give thanks.