

A Cleaned House and Nine Lepers

In the Gospels, Jesus issues dire warnings. We don't want to deal with those warnings, so we skip them as we read our Bible. We evangelicals are so focused on grace that we suppose such warnings are irrelevant and safe to ignore. I suspect most of us don't realize the seriousness of them! Let's look at two related warnings in the Gospel of Luke. I refer to the paragraph about a cleaned house in Chapter 11, verses 24 to 26, and to the episode in Luke Chapter 17, beginning with verse 11, dealing with ten lepers who were healed. Luke wrote for the Church. These texts therefore are for us. We need to discuss them. I'll do the cleaned house text first.

I. Luke Chapter 11 records a discourse by Jesus, and within it a conflict erupts between Jesus and the crowd. Some in the crowd alleged that Jesus was exorcising demons by the power of Satan. Nonsense, is Jesus' reply (vv. 17-19). That's absurd. God is obviously working thru Jesus. He then points out (vv. 20-22) that what they are witnessing is the inauguration of the promised Kingdom, because He, the King, is there. He, Jesus is the One who is stronger than Satan. He will overpower Satan and take away from him his captive people.

In view of who Jesus is, everyone is forced to respond. No one can ignore Him. So Jesus then makes this statement: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (v. 23). Wow! Let's read that again. And again. There's no neutrality regarding Jesus. A great war is going on, and everyone must take sides. There's no such thing as a passive response to Jesus. That's not acceptable. We're either with Him, evangelizing and calling people into the Kingdom, working with Him on God's great mission, or we're against Him. Either we're rescuing people from Satan's iron grip by sharing with others Messiah/King Jesus, the Son sent by God to deliver people from Satan's realm, or we're causing people great spiritual harm. To not join Jesus in gathering people into the Kingdom hurts others, keeps them from coming to God. Because of who Jesus is, those are the only choices anyone has. If we acknowledge who Jesus is in truth, we'll choose to go to work with Him. If not, well, we have missed exactly who Jesus is.

Then comes the mini-parable about the cleaned house. The immediate context is exorcism of demons. Jesus' subject here is an evil spirit, but the lesson is really about an imagined man (the "house"). An evil spirit leaves someone, finds no one else to possess, so it returns to that same person, now clean. It gathers a bunch of even worse evil spirits and they all take control of that person, rendering him vastly worse off than before. An exorcism, in other words, by itself is insufficient; it must be followed by the person who experienced deliverance deliberately seeking God. In this context, of course, although it's not explicit, it would mean the person who was delivered of the evil spirit should have filled his life with the knowledge and love of Jesus, whom God had sent.

If someone experiences (or realizes) God's work in Jesus, but doesn't then fill his life with what's essential and available from God, the Son who was sent, he's vulnerable to a renewed Satanic attack like never before. An exorcism is a gift from God. (In this chapter, it was through Jesus' ministry.) Receiving a gift creates an obligation to respond to the Giver of the gift. Jesus' teaching here has to do with our response to Him. It's devastating, in other words, to understand who Jesus is and all that's on offer through Him, but not to follow it up with an appropriate response. But, let's ask: What's appropriate?

Luke arranged his material so that the very next two verses answer that. "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it." This could mean obedience to all O.T. Scripture, which anticipated Jesus, therefore to commit to Him. Or more likely (and developing from obedience to God's Word), obedience to Jesus' teachings and commands, which put us to work. Obedient service, in other words, is an appropriate, expected response to Jesus, to all of God's Word. We *do* God's Word, we don't just read it and know about it. Our response to a gift expresses how much we value the gift, and the Giver.

Am I reading something into this text that's not there? No. If this were the Gospel of Matthew, the imagined person might be the Nation of Israel. They put away their idolatries ("cleaned house") but failed to follow up with faith in their Messiah/King. But this is the Gospel of Luke, and he's writing about *individuals* responding to Jesus.

II. In Luke Chapter 17 is the episode of the healing of ten lepers. This text also is here to teach that we must respond appropriately to Jesus. Knowing who He is and receiving His ministry, and then going on our way is inappropriate. The expected response for salvation is to worship him within a loving, grateful, personal relationship.

As Jesus headed to Jerusalem to suffer and die on a Roman cross, He encountered ten lepers. They necessarily stood off, away from Him, because they had leprosy, but they knew He could heal them. They asked for mercy. And Jesus indeed had mercy on them and sent them to the priest as the Law required. It's implied that they would be healed on their way. They did as Jesus instructed and, indeed, they were healed as they were on their way to Jerusalem. Nine continued on, but one of their number, who wasn't even Jewish but a Samaritan, returned to Jesus to express his gratitude. He did even more: He publicly gave glory to God, who he believed did the actual miracle. And he worshiped Jesus, throwing himself at Jesus' feet. He was humble, grateful, and filled with love for this unique Person. Jesus then asked 3 questions: 1. Weren't all ten healed? [Answer: Yes.] 2. Where are the other nine? [I don't think that Jesus wants an answer. Presumably they're pursuing life as they wished, delighted to no longer have to be shunned by society. The question was a rebuke and a warning to us: God expects an appropriately positive, active response to Jesus.] 3. Was the foreigner the only one to return to praise God? [Answer: Yes. By implication, the other nine also were expected to return to Him.] Jesus then said to that one, "Your faith has saved you."

This one man realized that Jesus uniquely was doing God's work. The other nine either didn't make that connection, or they simply didn't care. What mattered to those nine was, they were healed. Again, the issue is the response to Jesus. There's no such thing as a totally free gift. Receiving a gift places the person under obligation to respond to the Giver.

Luke has this here because we're to emulate the one who correctly understood who Jesus is. He's the only one who responded appropriately to the gift of healing. So this one man benefited from Jesus in a way that the others didn't. All ten obeyed Jesus' instruction to go to the priest at the Temple. And on the way, God in grace healed all ten of them. The ending pronouncement, therefore, "Your faith saved you," does not refer to this one man's trust in doing what Jesus instructed. And "saved"? What does that mean here? Let's understand these terms because it's exceedingly important to us.

According to Jesus, this man's response of gratitude and love is "faith." Faith is not mental agreement, as many of us today suppose. We in evangelicalism say that faith is "trust." OK. But here in Scripture, it's a personal relationship expressing love and gratitude. Worship is love and gratitude. This is the response to Jesus that saves.

The word "saved" here doesn't mean healing from leprosy. He was already healed. The other nine were healed too. It therefore means something more ultimate, though exactly what that is Luke doesn't specify here. But Luke certainly knew what that meant because for many years Luke worked closely with Paul. It means being delivered from all that's evil in order to be with God, the blessing of being in His presence. This man will benefit even more from Jesus' ministry on the cross.

Luke is being subtle here, hinting at why Jesus came. Do we understand who Jesus is? Jesus is God's agent of mercy to all mankind (see Romans 11:32). And an appropriate response to Jesus is expected, without which the mercy is ineffective. Exposure to God's mercy in Jesus is not enough; we must respond as God intends. God's gracious works are for all people, but only some respond as they should, not by merely saying "Thanks," but by seeking to be in relationship to the ineffable Person of Jesus, which glorifies God. And so they alone receive blessing. All others don't only miss out on the blessing. It's worse: Recall the discussion above regarding the "clean house." Although six chapters separate the cleaned house narrative from this one about the healed lepers, we should connect them. They both after all are aspects of the Gospel according to Luke. When this one man's house was swept clean (healed of leprosy), he didn't leave it empty but filled it by gratefully turning to God. The others, the nine lepers, in contrast, experienced a work of God in their lives, but they refused to respond as they should have. The consequences of their indifference to Jesus is not in the text. Implied is, all people who know of Jesus' atoning work but whose response isn't biblical suffer consequences.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews knew this principle. It's the basic argument of his book. It's why all the Letters in the New Testament have so much material on how a believer should live, because that's our response to Jesus. Faith is our response to Jesus, and our response has to be biblical. Let's go further. Do we really know what the Gospel is? The Gospel isn't a three-line propositional statement. The Gospel is Jesus! It's *everything* Jesus, including our response to Him as well as privileges and responsibilities. The nine healed lepers wouldn't respond to Jesus. The one healed leper did, he responded with love and gratitude.

We evangelicals claim that faith is "trust," but that's incomplete and only confuses things. Let's think about what "faith" is, because to receive kindness from God is not faith that saves. The ten lepers *had* to do what Jesus instructed and go to the priest. They had no choice. This was their only chance to be healed. So of course they went. That wasn't biblical faith. "Faith" is a very big word. It's our response to God, which is why this issue here in Luke is so important. Faith looks forward with desire for something God has said in Scripture that He will do or will happen in the future. It's accepting as a certainty, as true, what God has said about something otherwise unknowable—and living confidently on the basis of that truth. And faith is centered on Jesus. It's the desire to know Jesus, the One promised in the entire O.T., to be with Him, to be committed to Him.

In the Bible, faith is illustrated for us, not defined as we would like it to be. (Hebrews 11 describes faith, it doesn't define it.) This one healed leper realized that Jesus was from God, so he responded to the healing – indeed, to Jesus – with love for Him, and that's biblical faith. If we today know who Jesus is, and realize all that He's done for us (and is doing, and will do), we'll not only love Him, we'll trust Him, we'll commit our lives to Him, and we'll obey Him and be loyal to Him and serve Him regardless the risk or personal sacrifice. That's the expected and appropriate response to Jesus.

Our response of biblical faith is exceedingly important. Here's why: It's how we bear witness to Jesus' authority and His Person. It's also how we show love and gratitude to God for the wonderful grace He's shown us (the supremest gift, the greatest gift imaginable). Also, it's how we take the side of good in God's conflict with Satan and all evil. And it's how we express our transformation and, more ultimately, our union with Jesus, for that's the basis, indeed, the very essence of our salvation. And this: It's how we exalt the Son. There's something else.

Let me first ask, Why did the Son have to set aside His glory to actually enter this physical creation embodied, to live an austere obedient life, serving God by fulfilling all righteousness, then to suffer the agonies and shame of a cruel whipping and death by crucifixion? Why was all that suffering necessary to accomplish our redemption? Was there no other way? It was necessary because, Love is as love *does*. Love sacrifices self, endures suffering and loss for the sake of the one loved. In the same way, we who have been taken as God's adopted sons express the same kind of transcendent love in the same way as the Only Begotten Son. We love *by doing*. There's no other way. It's why we're "saved."

So, what's the warning here? It's this: God sent the Son into the world to save us, and so to bless us. God therefore has commanded us to respond by knowing and loving the Son. We supremely honor the Son by being like Him. That glorifies God. We mustn't be indifferent to Jesus, or ignore Him, or take Him for granted, because that dishonors Him and, although the text here doesn't make it explicit, that may mean losing out on God's greatest blessing. So, let's heed the text and be faithful.