

Gratitude: An Evidence that the Kingdom is Present

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The Gospel of Luke contains a significant amount of material not found in the other two Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Mark. Much of the material unique to Luke appears in Luke 9-18, after the second prediction of Jesus' death (Luke 9:44, paralleled in Matt. 17:22; Mark 9:31) and before the third passion prediction (Luke 18:31, paralleled in Matt. 20:17, Mark 10:33). A comparison of the three Synoptic Gospels shows that three chapters of Matthew 17-20 require only one chapter in Mark but fill nine chapters in Luke 9-18.

Many of the themes of Luke's gospel (the inclusion of Gentiles, prayer, joy, women, riches, sin and sinners, Holy and Spirit) are emphasized in Luke 9-18. This article focuses on one short passage, the healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). To put Luke 17 in context, one should note Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees and his teaching concerning the nature of the kingdom. These can be summarized as "what the kingdom is not" and "what the kingdom is."

In Luke 14, Jesus dines in the home of a Pharisee. That event introduces a confrontation with the Pharisees about Sabbath activities and Jesus' teachings about pride and table-seating preferences. Jesus continues with teachings about who will be invited to participate in the kingdom, the cost of discipleship, and the "lost" parables of chapter 15. The parables are given to encourage tax collectors and sinners but a source of strife and muttering among the Pharisees. The "money" parables and additional teachings of Chapter 16 are also directed to the Pharisees, for they loved money (16:14). The kingdom is not what the Pharisees think. The kingdom is not built on power, prestige, prominence, possessions, and human accolades. The kingdom is open to those the Pharisees would exclude. The kingdom is defined by forgiveness, faith, and willing service as one does one's duty (17:1-10).

In Luke 17:20, Jesus answers the Pharisees' question about when the kingdom would come. His answer is, "it is among you" (v. 21). The kingdom is sudden and unexpected; it is characterized by just judgments, humble worship, childlikeness, and self-sacrifice which result in true treasures (Luke 17-18).

Between these two sections of "what the kingdom is not" and "what the kingdom is" lies our text. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will demonstrate the nature of genuine kingdom service. On the outskirts of a village he meets ten lepers who were required to announce their uncleanness and maintain a distance from other people. Leprosy made friends of enemies, for one of the ten was a Samaritan, one who would otherwise have been excluded from Jewish social groups. That the lepers ask Jesus for pity does not mean that they know who he is. They would have asked for pity (money) from anyone they met. Jesus tells them to present themselves to the priest. That they went (on) may or may not suggest that they were obeying his instruction. The text simply says that as they went, they were cleansed. The Samaritan connected his healing with the contact with Jesus. He returned, praising God and thanking Jesus profusely. It is only at this point that the text reveals that this grateful man has been an outcast twice—as a leper, and as a Samaritan.

Jesus' question focuses the point. Where are the others? Weren't there ten? Is it really true that only this foreigner gives praise to God? Let us not miss the point: faith is not found only among "kingdom folks." The kingdom is not always where we think it is. We may be mistaken, even as were the Pharisees. We may fail to see the kingdom when it is among us.

During this season of thanksgiving, let us recognize that one characteristic of kingdom people is gratitude. Will you praise God for his bounty? Will you be thankful to Him? Do we really know what the kingdom is like?