

# “Does Anyone Envy the Leper?”

*Second Sunday after the Theophany*



**ONE OF THE MOST FEARED DISEASES** in the world for centuries was leprosy. Those infected might develop inflammations of the nerves, the respiratory tract, skin, and eyes. Ulcerating sores and numbness would result. When sufferers could no longer feel pain, then repeated injuries or infection due to unnoticed wounds could result in loss of fingers, toes or even noses. People with other skin ailments, such as psoriasis, were often tarred with the same brush as actual victims of leprosy.

The Scriptures record how the Israelites handled the problem: “*When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests, and the priest shall examine the diseased spot on the skin of his body; and if the hair in the diseased spot has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; when the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him unclean. .... But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest; and the priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is leprosy*” (Lv 13:2-8).

Even in the ancient world people believed that this long-term infection was contagious: that it was passed somehow from person to person. As a result those infected were often banished from contact with their family and community until proved infection free or until their death. As we read in Leviticus, “*The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp*” (Lv 13:45, 46).

The ten lepers whom Jesus healed as recorded in St. Luke’s Gospel had at some point been declared “unclean” and isolated from others. This is why, as Luke records, they “*stood at a distance*” (Lk 17:12) and called out to the Lord for mercy. There was no medical treatment for this disease which could allow patients to remain in their community until the 1980s!

## **Leprosy a Type of Sin**

In the Old Testament contact with what we might call the ultimate examples of our physical nature (childbirth, menstruation, or contact with the dead) rendered Israelites “ritually unclean.” Before they could worship in the temple they would need purification. To be “unclean,” then, was a sign of ritual impurity. This, in turn, would become a *symbol* for sin. Thus the

Prophet Isaiah spoke of the entire nation as unclean: “*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*” (Is 64:6).

Many Jewish and Christian commentators through the ages have seen leprosy as the Scriptures’ most vivid type of sin. Leprosy starts as an invisible infection which slowly dominates the victim’s life. Leprosy defiles and deforms the sufferers, isolating them from others. Ultimately the body becomes numb to further injury as leprosy destroys the ability to feel pain. It is an image of sin which, untreated, makes people its captive, contaminating and destroying them from within. Then, insensitive to wrongdoing, the victim becomes less able to see the effects of sin in the world. Lest this spreads, the sinner must be isolated from God’s People.

Often during history, however, people have come to believe that leprosy was an actual *punishment* for sin, particularly sins against chastity. Some saw this as a mercy from God: the sinner was punished in this life to spare a worse fate in the next.

### **How the Lord Treated Lepers**

The ten lepers of Lk 17 were not the only ones the Lord Jesus encountered according to the Gospels. Cleansing lepers, along with healing the blind, the lame and the deaf were considered signs that Jesus was the Messiah. In Mt 8:1-4 and Mk 1:40-44 26:6 we read of a healing accomplished by physical contact: Jesus “*stretched out His hand and touched him*” (Mt 8:3). In contrast, He healed the ten lepers in Luke at a distance, sending them off to the priests apparently unhealed. The ten did not doubt Jesus; they went their way as He directed them and along the road their healing was manifested.

In both cases the lepers were sent to the priests to verify their healing. Leviticus 14 gives detailed instructions on what was to be done if a leper was now clean, including bathing, shaving and sacrificing three lambs as well as being anointed with oil. Only then would the leper be considered ritually clean.

The Samaritan, however, returns directly to Jesus. He would never be deemed ritually pure by a Jewish priest. This freed him to recognize the One who made him clean.

### **Giving Thanks Like the Samaritan**

The grateful Samaritan has always been seen as an example to believers, calling us to be thankful for God’s blessings to us. Many of us, however, are only thankful when we receive special blessings from God. We forget that in every circumstance of our life, every person we encounter is an opportunity

for furthering us on the path to salvation. As St Paul noted, “*We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose* (Rom 8:28). Gratitude should be our daily attitude.

The fifth-century Syriac Father St John the Solitary offers this plan to develop an attitude of daily thanksgiving within us: “When evening comes, collect your thoughts and ponder over the entire course of the day: observe God’s providential care for you; consider the grace He has wrought in you throughout the whole span of the day; consider the rising of the moon, the joy of daylight, all the hours and moments, the divisions of time, the sight of different colors, the beautiful adornment of creation, the course of the sun, the growth of your own stature, how your own person has been protected, consider the blowing of the winds, the ripe and varied fruits, how the elements minister to your comfort, how you have been preserved from accidents, and all the other activities of grace. When you have pondered on all this, wonder of God’s love toward you will well up within you, and gratitude for His acts of grace will bubble up inside you.”

### **From the Prologue of Ochrid for July 23**

“Does anyone envy the leper? No one envies him. Why then do some envy the evil man when evil is a greater sickness than leprosy? Leprosy is a disease of the flesh but evil is a disease of the soul. A leper can be healthy within while he is unhealthy on the outside. However, the evil man can be healthy on the outside but his interior is ill, his heart is sick. Greater value has a tree that is sick on the outside but has a healthy core than a tree that is healthy on the outside but has a rotten core. Thus, leprosy is a lesser evil than evil i.e., than sin. ...

Does the physician envy the sick person? He does not envy him. Neither does the righteous one envy the sinner. If you do not know whether you are righteous examine your heart: do you envy the sinner? If you envy the sinner then you are not righteous; if you do not envy the sinner, then rejoice, O righteous one of God. ... The righteous one recognizes the sickness of sin, horrifying and deadly, and does not envy the sinner but pities him.”