

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

WHEN THE GIFT OBSCURES THE GIVER

*"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?"  
Luke 17:17*

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## WHEN THE GIFT OBSCURES THE GIVER

*"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?"*

*Luke 17:17*

"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?" In a world in which it is difficult to get a consensus on any moral value, I would hazard the hunch that most men and women would vote to renounce ingratitude. No one would seriously defend the ingrate; whether it be a son who gets too big for his mother and father, a public official who forgets the little people who backed him in his first campaign, a preacher who outgrows the gospel, or some athletic super-star who consistently demeans the fans who pay his salary!

It would seem that the story of Jesus and the cleansing of ten lepers provides us with a classic illustration of the sin of ingratitude. Our Lord was enroute to Jerusalem for the final time. As He passed along the border that separates Galilee from Samaria, He was attracted by a sight that was hard to bear. A cluster of ten dispirited people who were victims of leprosy cried out for mercy and healing. Jesus advised them to go and show themselves to the priests. The priests in their role as health officers were the only ones legally able to certify a clean bill of health. The lepers' plea was well rewarded, for Luke reports that, "As they went they were healed."

(Luke 17:14)

What stirs us about this happening is the fact that only one returned to give thanks. As the narrative has it, "One of them, 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." (Luke 17:15) One in ten! Not a very flattering percentage for humankind. And then, as if to put a lick of mustard on the point, Luke adds that the one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan.

\* \* \*

If this were a drama unfolding before our eyes, we would be tempted to hiss the nine. How could they be so insensitive? "Life raft" religion, that's about all they had.

"The devil was ill,  
The devil a monk would be.  
The devil was well,  
A devil of a monk was he."

It doesn't cost anything to say "thank you." The nine in our eyes are guilty of spiritual negligence. We fault them for conveniently forgetting. They were clearly in the wrong. Many a parent has lost her children, not by doing them harm but by doing them good. "Where are the nine? Were not ten cleansed?"

\* \* \*

I am inclined to be less censorious toward the un-thanking lepers than I used to be. After all, they did not outrightly repudiate or reject Jesus. They simply lost sight of Him in their newly found ecstasy. They allowed the gift to eclipse the giver. A. Boyce Gibson in his penetrating study of the religion of Dostoevsky notes that early in the celebrated Russian's life he drifted away from the faith of his family. Gibson describes that drift in this manner: "Dostoevsky did not exactly forget Christ, but he allowed him to be crowded out by his own derivatives." 1 Crowded out by his own derivatives.

"Where are the nine?" Jesus asked. Well, where were they? If we take Jesus' question literally rather than rhetorically we might do a bit of speculating as to where they actually were. Bear in mind that this was a socially enervating disease as well as a physically disabling one. The Greek word for leper comes from a verb that means "to scale or peel off." People in that day at least believed that leprosy was contagious. Thus, when one became a leper he was cast out --from his family, from the temple, from the town -- and made to wander about to fend for himself as best he could.

All ten obeyed Jesus' command and went off to see the priests. And, wonder of wonders, "As they went, they were healed." Try to feel your way into their ecstasy! They looked down at arms and legs that had been rendered hideous by scaly flesh and suddenly what they saw was pure and clean. They became deliriously happy.

"Where were the nine?" One went to the village pub to celebrate with his friends. One raced home for a family reunion: It had been years since he threw his arms around his mother and kissed her. Another went on to see whether the girl to whom he was engaged before those tell-tale spots appeared had waited for him. Still another, tired of living like a beggar, was intent on getting his old job back. And so it went with the rest. Christ had been crowded out of their lives by His own derivatives. The gift had obscured the giver.

\* \* \*

But rather than speculate further on the forgetfulness of the nine, let us ask ourselves a more profitable question: In which of His derivatives are we most likely to lose touch with Jesus? I suggest, for one, that we are prone to lose Him in our commitment to Christian principles for living. I wince when I hear the gospel reduced to a set of principles, the mastery of which will make one healthy, wealthy and wise.

I believe it to be true that when one opens his or her life to Jesus, that life becomes an improved life. To know Christ is to manage our lives more effectively. To turn to him is to experience an improvement in our personal relationships. We will do a better day's work. We will come into possession of an inner peace that will help ward off psychosomatic illnesses. But to abstract these principles from the gospel and to separate them from a living on-going awareness of Jesus is to abuse the gospels and misuse our faith. Jesus never intended to give us a set of self-operating principles that could be followed to

our profit regardless of our identification with Him. He did not come to give us more rules for the game. Had He done so, His yoke would not be easy nor His burden light. He came to give us Himself.

I would suggest that another derivative of faith that can contribute to our neglect of Jesus would be the benevolent or religious organizations to which we are committed. It is wrong to polarize the Spirit and organization. I do not walk with those who feel that if we had the love of God in our hearts we would not need to be in anyway organized or put together. One of the earliest actions of the early church was the formation of a group of deacons who were organized to care for certain widows who had been neglected. The church itself is an organizational derivative of Jesus. We are called to be His lengthened shadow in the world.

But I ask whether it is not possible for Christian people to lose Jesus in the church, of all places? Is it not possible for us to become excessively immersed in the derivatives of Jesus? Our Bible Societies, our mission boards, our various denominational commissions, agencies and committees -- so deeply immersed in these that we forget the one who got us into the business in the first place! We can become so engrossed in benevolent and religious organizations as to live in a veritable wilderness of memos, meetings, charts, and correspondence -- with the end result that we become hard and joyless inside.

I have one more suggestion to offer. It is possible to lose Jesus in the crusades and causes that we embark upon in His name. Christian activism is not a phase. I bristle when people suggest that our concern for civil rights or the migrant worker or poverty is simply a temporary aspect of the church's life. I bristle also when people tell me that it is all a matter of psychology. Some of us have a desire to penetrate history and others do not. So, one gets a reading on herself and acts accordingly. It is nothing of the kind. When the prophets of the Old Testament are coupled with the mind and vision of Jesus, a world is laid upon our hearts that we must serve! No question about this.

But sometimes we forget the importance of the role that Jesus plays in our social vision. Listen carefully to these lines from a reputable German theologian by the name of Friedrich Gogarten: "This new understanding of the relationship of man to the world, that is, that man is not responsible to it, but that he is responsible to God for it, and also for its remaining God's creature and not being put in place of God through a responsibility exercised towards it, expresses a perception of immense significance. It sets in motion a change which in truth affected the whole history of the world, and is so great that we know of no other such in the whole of history." 2

Let me break that down. What Gogarten is saying is that before the advent of Jesus people felt responsible to the world -- to their rulers, to the forces of nature, to the invisible spiritual forces that pervaded their life. But once Jesus had affected His liberating work, men and women came to see that they were not responsible to the world but for the world under God.

As a result of the work and insights of Jesus the church began to attack kings and thrones and dominions. It set itself, however belatedly, against slavery and child labor. It went about the business of erecting schools and hospitals, of trying to humanize prisons, of equalizing wages, of opting for better care for the elderly, not to mention a whole host of other causes and crusades.

But every once in awhile I run into Christian people who are so committed to this crusade or that, that they have no time for Jesus; so excited about their deliverance and their freedom that they forget its source. The result is that they tend to be overspent and discouraged, and easily fall prey to weariness.

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"Where are the nine? Were not ten cleansed?" James Russell Lowell was right: "The gift without the giver is bare." Jesus is not feeling sorry for Him-

self when He asks about the nine. He is sorry for them because all they got was the gift.

"Keep Christ in Christmas" is a common Advent cry. But "Keep Christ in Christianity" is a cry for all seasons. Keep Christ in your Christianity, for what makes us Christian and keeps us so is not allegiance to principles, however lofty; not membership in an organization, however noble; not participation in causes, however right. What makes us and keeps us Christian is our own inner personal experience of Jesus!

You are invited now to kindle that devotion and enlarge that experience in the sharing of the bread and cup.


#### CLOSING PRAYER

*God, give us the wisdom to trace our  
blessings to their source that we  
may love Thee more and more.  
Grant that not even Thy  
gifts may be allowed to come between  
our souls and Thee,  
for Thou art more than they.  
In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.*

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Gibson, A. Boyce, The Religion of Dostoevsky, p. 16, SCM Press, London, 1973
2. Gogarten, Friedrich, Christ the Crisis, p. 100, John Knox Press, Richmond, Va., 1967





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