

The Meaning of Mercy

Let's talk about leprosy. In our time it is known as Hansen's Disease. In Bible times there was no such thing as disease. There was only clean, and unclean. Leprosy was a chronic skin condition that caused a person's skin to be splotchy and discolored. Which in turn made that person "ritually unclean." It said so in the Book of Leviticus. It said that persons with leprosy were to be kicked out of the community. Why? Because ritual uncleanliness was believed to be contagious; you just don't hang out with unclean people.

Leviticus commanded that lepers were to live outside a city's gates. Furthermore, they were required to keep their distance, and to shout out "unclean" anytime anyone else came near. Are you getting the picture? Lepers were outcasts for life.

So when Jesus approached a certain village between Galilee and Samaria, it was really no surprise that some lepers, in fact ten of them, shouted out to him. The surprise was what they shouted.

First of all, they apparently knew who Jesus was. Because they called him by name. "Jesus." And they added the title "Master." Only the Gospel of Luke uses the title "Master" for Jesus. And then only on the lips of Jesus' disciples. That is, until now.

Second, they didn't merely shout out the single word "unclean." Instead, they shouted out two words, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς, meaning "have mercy on us."

It's been said that the meaning of mercy is either not getting what one deserves, or getting what one doesn't. So what do you think? Did these ten men deserve leprosy? Were they greater sinners than anyone else?

For them to cry out for mercy could mean one of several things. First, it could be (and most commonly was) a request for alms—that is, money. Like we often see on street corners in Wichita. "Will work for food. Any help appreciated."

Second, it could be a request for forgiveness. Like in Psalm 51, where the psalmist says "*Have mercy on me, O God . . . according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.* (51:1-2).

Third, it could be a request for healing. Why else would ten lepers shout out in one voice, the louder the better, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us?*"

Jesus simply says to them, "*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*" In Leviticus, showing yourself to the priest was the only way for a leper to be pronounced clean, and subsequently allowed to return to the community. These ten lepers probably didn't know what to think. I mean, they knew they weren't clean yet. A quick glance told them that. But it must have given them at least a glimmer of hope and possibility. So they did what he told them. And on the way, Luke says, "*they were made clean.*"

They were understandably overjoyed and began running as fast as they could to the nearest priest, screaming at the tops of their voices. Think how eager they would have been to return to their homes and families.

That is, all but one of them. That one, instead of running to the nearest priest, turned around, and ran back to Jesus. Luke says that he began "*praising God with a loud voice.*" And

that when he got to Jesus, *prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him*. And it is only then that Luke tells us, "And he was a Samaritan."

Why did Luke bother to tell us that? Why did that matter? Because to Palestinian Jews, Samaritans were outsiders. They were half-breeds, and supposedly had their own, twisted understanding of who God was, and where you go to worship him. And so to a Palestinian Jew, being both a leper and a Samaritan made you doubly outcast.

We can't really tell if Jesus himself was offended, or shocked, or even just surprised. He simply makes an observation in the form of a question. "*Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? . . . Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*"

We are finally ready to talk about the meaning of mercy. Is mercy the same thing as not getting what we deserve? Scripture tells us that what we deserve is death, because of our many sins. Which is why the writer of Psalm 51 pleads for mercy, for cleansing from his or her sin.

Or is mercy the same thing as getting what we don't deserve? The same thing as being healed, rather than left to die, alone and in agony?

Is asking for mercy nothing more than a way of asking for alms, a little spare change to get us through the day? Especially when that's all we can do, right? All we can do is get through each day, since tomorrow isn't here yet?

Is asking for mercy like asking for healing, for release from a chronic (or even acute) illness? Is it a way of asking to be released from an illness or disfigurement we've had all our life? Or, is it possibly like asking for forgiveness, to be released from the burden and debt of our sins?

I'd like to propose rather that mercy is actually best defined by another word—the word restoration. To be restored is indeed to be given that which we don't deserve, even as it is to not be given that which we do deserve. To be restored is to be healed, to have a condition removed that we've had maybe all of our lifetimes, allowing us to at long last live life most fully and completely. To be restored is to be forgiven, to have our sins taken away. It is to be allowed to return home—allowed not merely by God, but by the very community that had first cast us out.

No wonder it was only the Samaritan who understood it when he received it. May we go and do likewise.

Amen.