

The Mercy of God
Luke 17:11-19
Thanksgiving Sunday
October 12, 2025

The Word of the Lord from Luke 17: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

They’re out of options. There’s nothing else to do. They’re lepers, and the situation is clear. They’re dying from a terrible, and terribly contagious disease. They can’t go to work, they can’t go home, they can’t hug wives and kids. The law is clear: they’re required to stay away from everyone else, except other lepers. That explains why these ten are banded together, dying together, outside of town. If anyone who doesn’t have leprosy wanders their way, these loneliest of men are required to shout out a warning to stay away.

When Jesus comes along, they shout from a distance. Not “stay away,” but “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” They’ve heard. Although they’re ostracized and isolated, they’ve still gotten the news of Jesus. They have no other options. There’s nothing else to do. They have nothing to give in return for help. They are completely at the Lord’s mercy.

But I ask you: is there a better place to be than at the Lord’s mercy?

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” they cry. He hears their prayer and He has mercy upon them. It’s a strange sort of mercy, though: He sends them to somebody else. “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” He tells them. He just talks, that’s all. According to the Law, it’s the job of the priests to examine them and certify them to be healed if they’re cured, and that means getting back to home and friends and family. So the lepers do as Jesus tells them: and as they go, they are cleansed.

One of them comes back. He’s a foreigner, a Samaritan; and while we usually note the ingratitude of the other nine at this point, this one—this foreigner—only highlights the Lord’s mercy even more. The man has nothing to give to Jesus in return for healing. There’s reason to rejoice in this man who returns: the mercy of Jesus isn’t just for some, but for all.

The man returns because he has faith. Jesus says so: “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” That’s what faith does: it keeps running back to Jesus. It runs back to Jesus with thanksgiving, because faith gladly says, “I had nothing to give, but Jesus was merciful to me anyway.” It also runs back to Jesus for more. This is, perhaps, the greatest tragedy of the other nine: Jesus has more to give them, but they run away. They’ve got what they most want—they have their lives, health, families and homes again. But they don’t have what they most need—forgiveness, faith, life and salvation.

This is how the world treats Jesus: it takes what it wants and runs away from what it most needs. Thanksgiving provides an excellent example: the highlight of the holiday is food. Believers and unbelievers both like food and make use of it on a daily basis. Both believers and unbelievers have food for the same reason: the Lord’s mercy. The Lord mercifully provides daily bread. He keeps providing when people neglect to thank Him. He keeps providing daily bread even when people give thanks and

credit to a false god for the food He's provided. He didn't strike the other nine men with leprosy again because they were thankless, and He doesn't snatch the food He's given from those who fail to thank Him for that, either. He delights to be merciful to all.

The sad part about the world is that so many take the food and run, when Jesus has so much more to give. He didn't die on the cross to fill their bellies, but to cleanse them of sin. Those without faith, however, are happy to take the lesser gift of daily bread and run away without the greater gift of salvation. Jesus is there to give that greater gift. The Son of God is present in the flesh because their flesh is rotting away. In healing them, He shoulders the infirmity of their leprosy—He takes it into Himself, in order to bear it to the cross so that they might have healing. He also bears their sins so that they might have salvation. But nine of the men run away with what they want. That's what unbelief does.

Faith, on the other hand, keeps running back to Jesus. Faith keeps running back with thanks, and faith keeps running back for more. By faith, this leper knows that it's not just that he was at the mercy of God. He remains at the mercy of God. And by faith, he knows that there is no better place to be.

You are at the mercy of God, too. It's just not quite as apparent as it was for these lepers in our text. You're not standing in the desert outside of some village, isolated and ostracized from everybody else because of a terminal disease. You may have significant troubles—health concerns, employment concerns and the like; but you still have options and courses to pursue. There are still things that you can do; and as long as there are things you can do, you don't usually dwell too much on God's mercy. It's only when people are out of options, when nothing else can be done, that we think of them as being at the mercy of God. That suits sinners just fine, because we're often afraid of what God's merciful answer might be.

This presents a skewed picture of the Lord. One problem is that it makes **our** efforts sound more important than His, and His deliverance sound as dependable as an unproven medical treatment offered by a third-world nation. It's as if we say, "Well, there's nothing left for us to do. We might as well give God a chance at fixing this, but don't get your hopes up." There's another problem, even if we don't see God's mercy as a risky gamble: when we think that we should turn to God's mercy only when there's no other hope left, we treat the Lord as one who is distant and doesn't want to be bothered very much. We'll take care of ourselves without God's help, thank you very much: we'll only call upon Him and His mercy in dire circumstances.

The truth is that you are always at the mercy of God. Thanks be to God, the truth is also that God is always merciful.

Our country's Day of National Thanksgiving focuses largely on the "daily bread" sorts of gifts that God provides, the sorts of things that we talk about in the First Article of the Creed: "clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle and all my goods." All of these gifts are God's mercy to you. You need to be warm, so he sends you clothing and shoes. You need food, so He provides meat and drink. You need shelter and companionship, so He sends you house and home, family and friends. Whatever you need, He provides. Maybe we get tripped up because He doesn't deal with us directly: instead, He uses other people as His instruments to be merciful to us, and He uses you as His instruments to be merciful to others.

This is entirely consistent with our Gospel lesson: Jesus spoke His Word of mercy, and then He used the priests in their appointed calling to get these men back to their homes. He speaks His mercy and uses people to deliver His mercy to those around them. If you're sick, healing is possible because He speaks healing; but He also sends you to the doctor because that's the job He's given to the doctor. If you're hungry, there's food because He speaks His promise of daily bread; but He also sends you to the farmer, the rancher and the grocer, because that's the job He's given them.

Everything you have is an act of God's mercy. You are God's mercy to each other, and that should define how you live. Even the troubles you face are the ones permitted by your heavenly Father in His mercy so that you might see your sins and inabilities, confess them and thus trust all the more in Him.

As you daily confess your sins and put yourself at God's mercy, then you begin to see how merciful He is in all that He provides. If you deny His mercy until the situation is most dire, you will see your Savior as a distant, last-chance gamble who is worthy of little trust at all. In that case, your faith is near death, because faith doesn't keep the Savior at a distance. Faith runs back to the Savior with thanksgiving constantly; and while it's running back to the Savior, it keeps asking for more.

See, by faith you know that the Lord is gracious and merciful, even on the days when His mercy is hard to see. You know because His mercy is not confined to daily bread things that come and go. No, His mercy is built upon Christ and Him crucified for your sins. Because you are forgiven, God has no wrath left for you. And if God has no wrath for you, then all He has left for you is mercy and grace. Because you're sure that He has only mercy and grace for you, you run to Him with thanksgiving—not once a year in November, but constantly. You run to Him with thanks, and you run to Him for more. You confess your sins daily—not because you have to rub your face in the dirt before God will help you, but because you're certain that God is there with more forgiveness. You rub His ears with your requests in prayer, not because you have to nag Him to get His attention, but because you know that—for Jesus' sake—He hears your prayers and delights to answer you in His mercy. He wants to give more. He doesn't promise what you want—that's the sort of deal the nine lepers were after. He does promise what you need, so that you might be preserved to life everlasting.

Our liturgy today demonstrates this. I did a quick word-count of our page 15 order of service. The word "forgiveness" or "remission" shows up about four times, "grace" or "gracious" twice. "Peace" appears about six times. "Mercy" shows up about as many times as all of those put together. This service is about mercy: this is the people of God gathered together, run back to the Savior one more time to say, "We give thanks, for you are the merciful Giver of all good things, most of all forgiveness and salvation. Though we don't deserve it, be merciful to us!" And as faith gives thanks and asks for more, you are sure that the Lord delights to give more. You're sure because of the cross: for the sake of Jesus, God will be nothing but merciful to His repentant people.

Our final mention of mercy tonight will come right after the Lord's Supper: "O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, and His mercy endureth forever." You'll find this verse scattered throughout the psalms: it was often proclaimed at the temple, because the temple was where God was near to His people with mercy. The Lord is just as near—nearer!—to you tonight, present and merciful in His Word and His Supper. Forgiven by these means of grace, you can be certain that He will always be merciful to you.

O, give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; and His mercy endureth forever. And because His mercy endures forever, you can be forever confident that you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.