

Sermon for Sunday, August 30, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHEN YOU ARE SLIDING OFF THE ROOF"

St. Luke 17:11-19

Text: "And he said to him 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you
well."
St. Luke 17:19

There were ten of them. They were outcasts of society. They were not permitted to come close to normal people. If others approached them unawares, they were forced to cry out, "Unclean, unclean." They were poor. There was no work for them to do and besides, they were not physically able to do much work. They were lepers. They could only beg for a living. They were cut off from family and friends, forced to live a desolate life of weary loneliness, sickness, poverty--and so these ten had banded themselves together in a sort of miserable fellowship, because misery loves company.

There are several things about these people that we might notice first. For one thing, the Bible tells us they stood at a distance. That is, they were not a part of the intimate fellowship of those who traveled with Jesus. Undoubtedly they had heard about Him. The stories about Jesus had made their way rapidly throughout Judea and even the lepers had heard about his miracles. Yet, in no sense of the word could they really be classified as disciples or followers. It may be they had followed the crowds for a time, standing apart at the fringe. Yet, in no way could they be characterized as close to Jesus.

The second thing the Bible tells us is that they lifted up their voices. When you stop to think about it, these men had their backs to the wall. They were at the end of their rope. Life had already done its worst to them. Probably death held no fears for them anymore, but would be looked upon as a welcome escape from the awfulness of their wretched condition. When their disease was first diagnosed it must have been hard for them to believe. Surely they had gone to more than one doctor for a confirmation of diagnosis or for a new and different treatment. But in the end, all had failed. They were lepers and there was no cure. So, with their backs to the wall, these men lifted up their voices to cry out. How desolate, how woeful, how tragic must have been the pitiful sound of their cries. Yes, they were men at the end of their rope.

The third thing the Bible tells us is that they cried out to Jesus. Now that every other resource was gone; now that every other avenue of help had been explored and exhausted; now that there was no human way for healing to come, they turned to God. The Bible says that they lifted up their voices and said, "Master, have mercy on us."

So, the first thing we notice is that they stood at a distance, that they had reached the end of their own rope, and then they cried out to Jesus. Does that picture strike any responsive cords in your own mind? Does the situation we see here remind us of anybody we know--anybody like maybe ourselves?

I see myself in that picture. Maybe not all of the time, but at least some of the time. There are times when I'm not as close to Jesus as I ought to be; times when I'm standing at a distance. There are times when I'm not following

Jesus like I know He wants me to. And then I get in trouble. Some problem comes along. Suddenly I discover I can't handle that problem. It's too big for me. And maybe I try everything I know, use up every resource at my disposal, and still it doesn't help. And then, when my back is to the wall, when I'm at the end of my rope, I start calling on Jesus, I start begging God to get me out of my mess.

Are you guilty of that? I was talking to a friend the other day. She had really gotten herself messed up. And right in the middle of her problem she got her back up against the wall. She started asking God to help her. What she really meant was for God to undo what she had done. Without anything on her part, she just asked God to hit her problem over the head with a magic wand and make all her problems vanish.

Isn't it true that there are often times in our lives when we are not close to Jesus? Isn't it true that we get away from the Bible, get away from our devotional life, get away from meaningful Christian fellowship? And when we do that we begin to get worldly-minded. We begin to focus on the things of the flesh. And too often we begin to violate the laws of God and to break His commandments. Then some trouble comes along and we have no real spiritual resources with which to fight back. So, when we are out of fellowship with Jesus, when we find our backs against the wall and we are at the end of our ropes, then we begin to lift up our voices and cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Do you know what we are asking for when we do that? We are asking God to be a fairy Godmother and wave a magic wand to turn our pumpkins into lovely coaches and our worn-out sandals into glass slippers. We are asking God to be some magical Peter Pan and sprinkle us with stardust. We want our problems to be solved and our sin undone and to be free of its consequence in our lives.

The second thing I would call to your attention about our scripture this morning is the response of Jesus. The Bible says, "When he saw them he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went they were cleansed." The fact was, Jesus was the answer to their problems. Jesus was the solution to their need. At last they had come to the right place for help. Every other remedy had failed, but when they came to Jesus they came to the right man. He had the answer. He had the solution.

If you are at the end of your rope, if your back is against the wall, and if you are crying out to Jesus, you have come to the right place. Jesus is the answer to the problems that all of us have this morning. Some of us may not be very close to the Lord this morning for whatever reason and we may have some desperate problem in our lives. And it is probably a good bet that some of us are here this morning just because we are at the end of our rope and we are crying out to Jesus for help. Well, we have come to the right place and the right man.

A moment ago I mentioned a friend of mine who had gotten herself in a mess. She cried out to God to wave His magic wand. Now, the fact is God answered her prayer. Jesus responded to her cry of desperation. Not in the moment she expected nor in exactly the way she wanted, but God has already come to meet her in the middle of her need and this morning things are better for her. That's the way God is. He does love us. He does care about our needs, our

hurts, our tears. And when we cry out to Him in our desperation, He responds. Perhaps not in the way nor the time we expected or wanted, but He responds. For example, look at our ten lepers. They were not healed immediately. It was as they went on their way that they suddenly discovered they were well. So it is with us, often it is only as we look back that we discover that as we went on life's way, God's healing, God's help, the mercy of Jesus, was at work in our lives and we were well again.

Think back on your own life and see if it hasn't worked that way for you. Think back on the times you have had a desperate need and cried out to the Lord. As you have gone along life's way, look back and see how God met that need. Maybe things didn't work out exactly as you wanted or planned or hoped for, but looking back you can see how wise God has been in His mercy to you. And if you came here with some need this morning, crying out to Jesus, I know He will bless you and help you. You may not see it right away and it may be different from anything you had ever expected, but tomorrow or next week or even next year, you will look back and you will suddenly realize how you have been blessed and helped and your need met.

Now we come to the third thing in our scripture that I want to point out for us. The Bible tells us that one of the men, when he saw that he was healed, turned back. He began to praise God and he fell on his face at the feet of Jesus. Notice several things here. First he saw he was healed and gave glory to God. Because God doesn't answer our prayers in the way we had expected, often we don't give him the credit. We really don't see that we have been healed. Too often we are like the man who was working on the roof of his house. He began to slide and realized he would fall off the roof. "O God," he cried, "Save me." And then his pants caught in a nail and he stopped sliding. "Never mind, God," he said, "a nail has got me now." So we are like that! We are not sensitive to how God has worked in our lives to answer our prayers and we don't give Him the praise.

I've had people facing serious surgery say to me, "Pray that God will heal me." They say, "I'm sliding off the roof--ask God to save me!" Then when God uses the skill of the doctor, the nursing care of the hospital, and the healing process of the body, the person thinks a nail caught him and he never stops to see how God answered his prayer. Maybe he had expected a magic wand to be waved over him, but God used His own wisdom to make the person well. But too often the person never gave God the praise and glory. He was saying, "Never mind, God, a nail has got me now."

The other thing is this: the Bible says that the leper fell on his face at Jesus' feet. I guess you could say he became a Jesus fanatic! As our young people would put it, he became a Jesus freak. Lot's of people don't like fanatics when it comes to religion. Somehow it seems to be in poor taste or almost indecent. People think Jesus freaks are odd or queer or peculiar. And while you can be a baseball fanatic or a football fanatic, nice people aren't religious fanatics.

I have had parents say to me, "Don't you think our young people are a little too religious? Don't you think they are a bit too turned on for Jesus?" Well, I see a lot of young people today who are turned on to sex, turned on to drugs, turned on to rebellion. And young people try just about anything. If some of the parents who say that to me could know some of the things their

kids have tried or done, they might feel differently. No, I'm glad young people--at least a few of them--are trying Jesus and are finding He meets their need and are getting turned on for Him. It's those young people who are about the only future and the only hope our world has.

When the leper fell at Jesus' feet, Jesus said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." Now, what did that mean? It didn't mean falling at Jesus' feet made him physically well. He was already cured of his leprosy. So it didn't mean that. No, it meant he was a whole person. It meant he was no longer a sin-sick person. He was well--spiritually well.

And that's what our world needs. It needs some people who don't want just to get out of trouble, but who want to be whole persons. It needs some people who are living life at the feet of Jesus--fanatics, if you will. It needs some people who are spiritually well, whole persons in the deepest sense of the word.

There were ten men with a common problem. They cried out to Jesus and He got rid of their problem. One of those ten ended up at the feet of Jesus--a fanatic, I suppose. Of the ten, he was the only one who really got well. His real healing, his whole healing, came at the feet of Jesus. And that's the only place you and I will find healing; that's the only place we will find wholeness. You see, when you are at the feet of Jesus, even when you are sliding off the roof, a nail may not catch you, but He always will!