

Priorities, Presence, and Praise

“*Where are the other nine?*” Not surprisingly, these words of Jesus tend to get a lot of play when this text happens to fall on one of the busiest travel/vacation weekends of the entire year. It makes sense. *Where is everyone else?*” Now, before we go any further, we need to figure out: ***Who exactly is Jesus addressing when He asks this question?*** He’s certainly not addressing the nine guys who aren’t there. The simple answer is that He’s addressing the lone Samaritan. Perhaps, but I don’t think so. A) The grammatical construction doesn’t lend itself to that. B) That puts the Samaritan in the ugly situation of having to answer for those other guys (which he never does). The Samaritan never bad mouths the others. He doesn’t talk about them, nor does he attempt to make excuses for them. All we hear out of the Samaritan’s mouth is praise of God, which is directed to Jesus Christ. He praises God by praising Jesus, falling at Jesus’ feet and worship God by worshipping Jesus. ***Did you ever stop to consider that Jesus is asking this question to us?*** He’s asking this question for our sake. In fact, I would go so far as to say that Jesus is asking a ***rhetorical question***; i.e., a question that doesn’t require an answer because the answer is obvious.

Consider the facts. We know why Jesus commands the men to journey to the Temple in Jerusalem and show themselves to the priests. With this command Jesus is ***fulfilling the Levitical Law*** (Lev 14), which states that if a person is healed of some skin disease (like leprosy), they are to show themselves to the priests for examination, and they are to render the appropriate sacrifice, restoring them to fellowship with their brothers and sisters, and most importantly, restoring them to public worship ***within God’s holy house***. Pronounced clean, they could now be in God’s holy presence in His holy house. Jesus is sending these guys to the priests to show that He did not come to abolish God’s Word, ***but to fulfill it***. Jesus is sending these guys to the priests as ***living, breathing, purified proof*** of who He is and what He’s all about.

So in this way, we can’t really fault the nine guys for doing what Jesus tells them to do. They were obedient (and no doubt thankful that somebody even paid attention to them and showed a little compassion to them). They all immediately obeyed His command and went to show themselves to the priest. Remember: They weren’t healed **until** they were on their way. They didn’t know when or even if any sort of healing would take place. ***Jesus told them to journey, so they did***. That kind of blind faith/obedience is certainly commendable. And it was in the course of this journeying to show themselves to the priests that they were healed. ***But...only the Samaritan had a saving faith***. The other nine were only made well “skin-deep,” but the Samaritan’s soul was healed and made well. His faith in Jesus as God’s Messiah in the flesh—God Himself in the flesh—made him

well and whole and complete unto salvation, or as the original Greek says: "saved him."

"Where are the other nine?" It's obvious from the question that the other nine didn't have this kind of *saving, Christ-centered faith*. It's safe to say that they didn't recognize God in the flesh in their very presence. There is no doubt that they recognized in Jesus *a powerful man; a miracle worker*. Like Nicodemus, they almost certainly recognized the fact that God was clearly on the side of Jesus, because no one could do such mighty things unless God was with him, right? They obviously had the faith to call on Jesus when they were suffering and needed help. *But did they recognize Immanuel?* Did they recognize God Himself in their midst, not only showing mercy to them, but showing great and undeserved grace to them by healing them of their maladies? The answers to these questions seem pretty obvious, don't they?

Another troubling fact to consider: These men were journeying to the Temple in order to fulfill the law (which could not save their souls); to satisfy the workers of the law. When you think about it, Almighty God in the flesh was **already** with them right there, and yet they were intent on journeying to an *empty Temple... to where God wasn't*. Remember: God's glory/Spirit had never returned to the re-built Temple after the Babylonian Captivity. In fact, God's glory would not return to the Temple until Christ Himself—God in the flesh—would return (a return which caused Simeon to sing praise to God). Here was Almighty God in the flesh *already with them*, and they missed it. That's what is so sadly ironic in all of this. It's obvious from their actions that being restored to the presence of God (which is what the Levitical Law was really all about) wasn't really their primary concern. Here was God in their presence, *and all the "other things" came first*. Too busy to even say "thank you."

What about you? That's what this is all about. Where are you? I know that sounds like a weird question. After all, you're here! You're not like those other nine, who were nowhere to be found when it came time to render thanks and praise to God. You're not like all those others who are too busy worshiping the vacation god, the pool god, the barbecue god, and all the other gods in Old Adam's pantheon of selfish idolatry. Understand: I'm not asking this *only* in terms of simple physical presence... although physical presence is a part of faith and worship. (Understand: There is a huge difference between "not able to be here," and "not willing to be here." We're not talking about the sick, the shut-in, or those who work on Sundays. We're talking about those who simply choose to not be here.)

You can't say you love God and all His gifts, *and yet blow Him off*. I know we always have plenty of excuses, but facts are facts. By definition, Christians are "Christ followers." If you blow off Christ in order to "go your own way" (which is a TERRIBLE translation!), *then you are not following Christ, are you?* You

are not walking in His Way; in the Way of godly wisdom and faith; in the Way of the Lord. You are known by your fruits. Showing up to worship is a fruit of faith!

But... I digress. We're not here to talk about those who aren't here. ***What about us?*** Even showing up to worship doesn't always translate into being "present" with God, does it? Anyone can show up and punch the clock. You can be here, and yet be far away from God at the same time, checking your phone, thinking about where you're gonna go for lunch or how you still need to mow the lawn, wondering why that person is wearing those clothes, or "whispering" with your neighbor. You can be here, and still not be here. You can come into the presence of God and not hear a thing. You miss it all. This is why I ask: Where are you, not just today—right now—but always? ***Where is your heart? Where is the focus of your worship? Who/what is the focus of your worship, your praise, your thanksgiving? Who/what is most important?*** Examine your life through the lens of the other nine. Again: Jesus asked the question regarding their absence for our sake.

Perhaps the better way of getting to the root of all this is by asking the simple question: ***Where is God?*** Where is God in the midst of your life, in bad times as well as in good times? The answer to all these questions is pretty obvious, isn't it? However... I would caution you here. I know Old Adam tries to comfort himself with the fact that "God is everywhere." Old Adam always tries to comfort himself with the fact that he can do ***whatever he wants, whenever and wherever he wants***, and since God is everywhere, it's okay. Old Adam likes to believe that he really is worshiping God when he sleeps in or blows off church for the lake. After all, God is everywhere, right? I can worship God in the boat, in the tree stand, in bed, or while cleaning the pool and mowing the lawn. I'm not asking about the omnipresence of God. Where is God? Where is God... for you? Answer: Right where He tells you to seek Him; right where He promises to be.

Look to this font. Look to this altar. Here is Christ! Here is the glory of God! Consider the facts. Consider what He Himself has told you. Here is the One who has baptized you and washed you and pronounced you clean in the water and blood that flowed forth from His riven side. Here is where He Himself calls us and gathers us in order to feed us and nourish us with His own life-giving Word and Sacrament. ***"As often as you do this, remember what I have said. This IS My body. This IS My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin."*** This High Priest of God has declared you pure. "It is finished!" No one and nothing can ever steal this away from you. Almighty God Himself has justified you and declared you ***"holy and righteous in His sight"*** all because of the all-atoning work and person of your High Priest and life-giving sacrifice, the Lamb of God Himself—Jesus Christ. **And yet...is this our top priority? Always?** Do we endeavor to come before Him in reverence and humility, praising Him for His

undeserved gifts of mercy and grace? Do we endeavor to come before Him at all, or are we too busy worshipping our own wants and desires?

Here is Christ. Here is Almighty God Himself... for you, in good times, in bad times, rich, poor, in sickness and in health. Wars, rumors of wars, sickness, drought, high cotton, empty shelves and overflowing cups/pantries. Here is Christ... for you. With all this in mind; knowing and believing all this, I guess the best way to end is by asking another rhetorical question: ***How can you not want to run to Him and fall on your face in thanks and praise and give glory to God? How can you not want to run to Him and come before Him as you offer up your sacrifice of thanksgiving, not just today, but always; not just today, but especially on the Lord's Day?***

My fellow redeemed; all those who have been washed clean and made alive in Christ: Here He is! Here is Almighty God, in your presence, for you and your salvation. May this cruciform Good News for you be your top priority... always. May Christ for you and with you be the focus of ***all your worship, all your praise and thanksgiving***, now and into all eternity. O give thanks unto the Lord—***ALWAYS—in all times and circumstances***, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever. You are the living, breathing, baptized proof of this.

AMEN