At that time, as Jesus entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. “When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. Then 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’s feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then said Jesus: “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” And he said to him: “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

On his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus enters a village and ten lepers come to Him. No doubt, they had heard of the Lord’s fame, who, for about three years, was ministering “with the Holy Spirit and with power, [going] about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Acts 10:38). Leprosy, known today as Hansen’s Disease, can be cured with early diagnosis and proper treatment, and is not as contagious as once believed. In ancient times, however, leprosy was thought to be highly contagious and could not be cured. It brought great physical suffering as well as...
total banishment and isolation from society. Lepers were removed from any contact with family or friends, and they were not permitted to enter the Temple nor participate in the religious or liturgical life of Israel. The lepers encountering the Lord in the narrative would have been on the outskirts of the village, but when they heard that Christ had come, they entered the town and, standing at a distance, addressed Him as “Master” and asked for His mercy.

The lepers come to Jesus with a cry from their heart, and we read that they “lifted up their voices.” It was not a quiet, tentative request but an urgent cry from those who were dying, and who were suffering on the fringes of society, alone and miserable. When Jesus saw them, He immediately told them: “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” This might have been a very puzzling command to the lepers. In the Old Testament, the Mosaic Law required that people with leprosy be isolated, but if they were ever to be cured by a miracle, they were to go back to the priests for restoration. In the book of Leviticus, we read: “If the leprous infection is healed in the leper . . . the priest shall make atonement for the one to be cleansed before the Lord” (Leviticus 14:3-31). The lepers no doubt knew of the Law that regulated their condition, but now Jesus apparently sends them to the priests without curing them first – at least as far as they could understand. Notice that Jesus did not even touch them, as he often did in other healings. This is because the Lord heals each one of us in our individuality, in His own way, and in His own time. There is no set formula for our healing and salvation.

Here is where faith and obedience come into play. The lepers obey the word of Jesus, without questioning why they were asked to show themselves to the priests while they were still apparently diseased. They did not question the Lord nor oppose His command, but went as He commanded. We read that as they went, they were cleansed. Notice that their healing came about while they were, first, exercising their faith in Him, and second, obeying Him without question. They were believing and obeying Him as they departed and made their way to Jerusalem, where the priests resided. This was both a display of faith (in Christ and His words) and of works (through their obedience); and as we know: faith without works is dead (James 2:17). The virtue of obedience (ὑπακοή in Greek) is critical in our relationship with God and is often mentioned in the writings of the Church Fathers. As Saint John of the Ladder says, “Obedience is … a voluntary death … the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility.” Voluntary obedience, in other words, is the means through which we set aside our personal cares and self-interest and arise as true sons and daughters of God.

As the Gospel tells us, however, of the ten lepers that were healed, only one, a Samaritan, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and fell to his knees Jesus's feet, giving him thanks. This Samaritan came back with a grateful heart to worship God the Son who healed him. To him, Jesus was no longer just the “Master,” but the “Lord” – not One merely commanding, but his personal benefactor. This leper was a Samaritan, and
Samaritans were considered as non-canonical Jews and unclean, because they didn’t follow the Jewish law in the same way that the rest of the Jews did. They were deemed “heretics,” and foreigners. Jesus uses the expression here ironically, as a criticism of the Jewish attitude of the time, and says, “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” The word the Lord uses is translated “foreigner” (αλλογενής in Greek) and is the equivalent of the modern Greek word “xenos” (ξένος) that is, a stranger or outsider. The Lord was emphasizing that prejudice was unhelpful and misleading, because it was precisely the “foreigner” who came back to thank Jesus in love!

The Lord healed the Samaritan together with the others, but only the Samaritan goes back to Jesus praising God and thanking Jesus for the wonder of his healing. His thanksgiving was an act of love – and Christ honors the gratitude of the Samaritan while remarking on the ungratefulness of the others. The Lord does this to show the people of His time, and us, that faith alone will not save us. We need to show our gratitude to God. Love for Christ should lead us to be grateful, and to obey His commandments (John 14:15). The Church teaches us to be thankful even during difficult times and to say, “Glory to God” (δόξα τω Θεώ in Greek), no matter what might happen. As Saint Peter of Damascus says, “Be mindful of God at all times, in all places, and in every circumstance. For no matter what you do, you should keep in mind the Creator of all things … everything you do becomes for you an occasion for glorifying God....”

Jesus’ command to the lepers was a test of faith, of obedience, and of love. As Saint Gregory Palamas says, “The ten lepers are like the entire human race. All of us were lepers because we all had fallen into sin, as the divine Paul says, ‘All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace’ . . . but when the Lord descended from heaven and assumed our nature, He freed it from the condemnation which came from sin.” It is by our faith in Christ that we hear His word and we believe in Him and His love for us; His compassion for us and His power to heal us. It is by our obedience to Him that we keep His commandments, and do what He teaches us to do – even when we do not understand our own circumstances, and even when prayers seem to go unanswered. It is by our love that we express our gratitude, when we come to the Lord to worship at His feet and praise Him for His great love for us and His abundant provision for our lives. May we always be like the Samaritan, and former leper, who believed, obeyed, loved, and was grateful – for then we will hear the Lord say to us also, “Your faith has made you well!”