

## The Significance of the Priest in the Healing of the Ten Lepers: A Contextual Interpretation of Luke 17:12-14

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### **Abstract**

*The significant place of Priest in the development of human society in the biblical era highlights the fact that it is an important issue in our modern church today. If the office of Priest had a place in the Bible, does it still have a in the contemporary religious institutions? How relevant is the office of Priest today? These and other relevant questions regarding the significance of the office of the Priest are what this paper tried to investigate. To achieve this objective, the study examined the role of the Priest in the story of the healing of Ten Lepers in Luke 17:12 – 14. The study adopted the historical-critical and hermeneutical methods in contextualizing the story of the healing of the Ten Lepers. The study discovered that it was the responsibility of the Priest to make the final pronouncement as to the cleansing of any Leper in Israel. In other words, the Priest played an active role in the cleansing of Leper in Luke 17 in the sense that even though they had been healed by Jesus, the pronouncement of the healing had to be made by the Priest. The study thus concludes that if attention is given to the significance of the Priest in modern day Christianity, it will enhance the ministry of the church as she seeks to fulfil her mission to the world as God intended and also serves as agents of socialization to better the society. The paper therefore recommended that biblical teachings on the significance of Priest in healing ministry of the church should be emphasized. The contemporary churches should be made to understand that the Priests function as mediator of equilibrium between holy and profane in human society.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *Significance, Priest, Healing, Ten Lepers*

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## **Introduction**

The story of the ten lepers healed by Jesus in Luke 17:12-14 is one that draws attention of the significance of Priest. In it we see a place of recognition given to the office of the Priest by Jesus. The ten lepers thought that Jesus was going to heal them without any reference to the Priest, but instead, he told them to show themselves to the Priest. Right from the Bible time Priest performed important function of making sacrifices and offerings on behalf of the people. They also instructed them in order for them to enjoy God's blessings. Throughout the history of the Israelites, it continued (Schrock, 2022). Priesthood is a central message that runs through the Bible (Schrock, 2022). The failure of the church members in their attitude of placing high premium on the significance of Priest as expected in spite of Jesus' injunction is a severe cause for concern. Sparks of not according the Priest his place of significance have continued to result in hatred, misunderstanding, disorderliness, acrimonious relationship and lack of exhibition of love, which can lead to distortion in mental well-being and fulfilment in life. It is against this backdrop that the paper tries to investigate the significance of the Priest in the healing of the ten lepers with reference to Luke 17:12-14 with the aim of contextualizing them in modern church for lasting peace and progressive growth of the church. The study employed the historical-critical and hermeneutical methods to achieve the objectives.

## **Priest and his Responsibilities**

According to Schrock (2022), the prototype of a royal Priesthood can be traceable to the Garden of Eden. When God created Adam and Eve, he placed them there to manifest his glory, by having dominion over all the created things. He gave them Priestly commandments to serve in the Garden of Eden. The name Priest first appear in Genesis 14:18 with reference to Melchizedek "And Melchizedek, king of Salem brought out bread and wine, he was Priest of God, Most High". In the Levitical procedures, the office of the Priesthood was restricted to the tribe of Levi, and especially to one family of that tribe, the family of Aaron. Specific laws regarding the qualifications of Priest are given in Leviticus 21:16–23. There are also ordinances as regards their dress and the mode of his consecration to the office (Easton, 2023).

Priest is a word derived from the Greek presbyter, which signifies an "elder". In the worship of the Patriarchs, the head of the family functioned as the Priest (Smith, 2023). He is one who is duly empowered to minister in holy things, especially to offer sacrifices at the altar of God. In the New Testament, the word is referred to Priests of the Gentiles, as in Acts 14:13, to those of the Jews (Matthew 8:4), to Christ (Hebrews 5:5-6). During the time of the [people of Israel the office of priest was of supreme importance and of high rank. The high priest stood next the monarch in influence and dignity. For instance, Aaron the head of the Priestly order was closely linked with in the great law giver, Moses and shared with him in the government and guidance of the nation (Orr, 2023).

It was in the strength of the responsibilities of the Priests that the Israelites were brought into close relationship with God. By extension of the activities of the Priests, the people were taught the doctrine of sin and its expiation in forgiveness and worship. In fact, the Priest were the veritable sources of religious knowledge for the people and the source whereby spiritual life was passed. They also performed the role of representation. God graciously provided for his people at a distance from him, the office of a Priest in order that he would appear in his divine presence on behalf of the people. The Priest was to atone for their sins. He was their mediator who makes propitiation for the offenders. The Priest stood in place of the whole people. They were regarded as being in him. The prerogative held by him belonged to all the people. Nevertheless, on this

note, it was transferred to him, the reason being that it was not visible that all the people of Israel should keep themselves without blemish as the Priest of God. This representation meant that the Priest has to bear the tribal names on his shoulders in the onyx stones and second, in the tribal names engraved in the twelve's gems of the breastplate. This he would do before Yahweh as a memorial (Orr, 2023).

Furthermore, the Priest was responsible for offering of sacrifices. As a way of making atonement for the people's sins, they did it by means of sacrifices and blood shedding. It was the duty of the high Priest to carry the blood of the sin offering into the most holy place and sprinkled it seven times on the mercy seat, thus signifying the people's sins being covered from the sight of the Holy God. He also marked the same blood on the horns of the altar of burnt offering in the court of the Tabernacle for Yahweh to see who is the right Judge and Redeemer.

The Priest interceded on behalf at the people. The advocacy cannot be affected until the sins of the guilty are religiously expiated. The sprinkling of the blood on the mercy seat was to cover the sins from the sight of God and also as an appeal to him for forgiveness. He alone could enter the most holy place and to sprinkle the blood. He must be religiously clean and physically perfect. The Old Testament describes clearly the responsibilities of the Priest that are pivotal to the religious and social life of the people of God.

Apart from the above responsibilities of the Priest, he also performed the role of ritual cleansing of a Moses, specifically Leviticus 14, whether the leper has been free from leprosy.

The Priest shall command them who is to be cleansed, two living clean birds and cedar wood and scarlet stuff and hyssop and be brought for the one to be cleansed. Then the Priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water. He shall take the living bird with the cedar wood and the scarlet stuff and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over it seven times upon him who is to be cleansed of leprosy, then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field Leviticus 14:17.

A Priest is one who has been empowered to minister in holy things, especially to render sacrifices at the altar. He functions as an intermediary between God and men. The office of Priest in Israel was of utmost important and of high status. He stood next to king in both influence and honour. It was in the dignity of the responsibilities of the Priest that the Israelites were brought into close relationship with God. Ritenbaugh (2023) remarks that the basic role of a Priest is to aid people in reaching God so that there would be good relationship between them and God. He does this through instructing them in the way of life. Armstrong (2021), noted that the Priest performs role in both religious and social life of the people of God. Jesus is the fulfilment of this responsibility. He stood in the gap between God and his people.

### **Ceremonial Law on Cleansing of Lepers**

Leviticus 14:1-32 highlights what a person must do after being healed to be ceremonially clean. Leprosy is the major issue in this chapter. It specially deals with pronouncing the cleanliness of the lepers and the sacrifices expected of them. The Priest is required to go outside the camp to inspect them.

The LORD said to Moses, This shall be the law of the leper for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the Priest and the Priest shall go out of the camp, and the Priest shall make an

examination. Then, If the leprous, disease is healed in the leper the Priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two living clean birds and cedar wood and scarlet stuff and hyssop, and the Priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water. He shall take the living bird with the cedar wood and the scarlet stuff and the hyssop and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water, and he shall sprinkle it seven times upon him who is to be cleansed of leprosy; then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field. And he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean, and after that he shall come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent seven days. And on the seventh day, he shall shave all his hair. Then he shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and he shall be clean (Lev. 14:1-9, RSV).

The Priests performed a critical role in the cleansing of lepers. By making atonement before God on behalf of the lepers, the Priests were instituting a foundation upon which God would respond with healing. God made provision for the ritual cleansing of a leper when leprosy was incurable and that the Priestly ceremonial performance for the leper healed of his leprosy is clearly a picture of Jesus Christ (Jones, 2019). It therefore follows that there is a connection between leprosy and sin. Every part of the ceremonial cleansing represents a symbol that points to Jesus. The purity law finds accomplishment in Jesus. The rituals which the leper goes through is for him to be cleansed, not to be healed. Healing comes only from God. The prescribed ritual that is made up of several steps is for normal life to resume (Stedman, 2014). On their way to see the Priests, they were healed. Their bodies were restored, walking in faith. Their skins changed from being full of sores and diseases to being clean and healthy. The presence of the word “cleansed” means they were cleansed of more than leprosy, they were restored to full social and religious fellowship with the rest of the people. There is nothing in the total range of human extraordinary which shows so strikingly the divine power of the redeemer, and the nature and degree of his work of mercy on man’s behalf, as this leprosy (Lewis, 1987).

According to Guzik (2021), it was the responsibility of a Priest to declare a leper clean or unclean. It is in this manner that the Priest “made” a leper clean, by examining his condition according to the word of God. When God has healed any leper, it is the duty of the Priest to cleanse him. If it is discovered that the leprosy disease has left the leper, the Priest must declare it with a particular solemnity that the leper may be more impacted with the mercy of God stretched out to him in his recovery and that others might be free to relate with him (Henry, 2023).

Jesus commanded the lepers to go and present themselves to the Priests. The order is essentially a promise of renewal to health. In this place, the climax of the story is being introduced. “Show yourselves to the Priests” is translated “Go and let the Priests examine you” (Good News Translation). Lazar (2019) remarks that Jesus instructed the lepers to “go”, he was telling them to obey the Law of Moses. The law had very particular regulations governing people who had leprosy. It contained the method for restoring persons who recovered from it. If such a person were cleansed, he or she would need to see a priest who would certify him clean. Jesus instructed them to obey the Law of Moses by presenting themselves to the priests. He mentioned

“Priests” because first, they might go to the one of the Levitical towns in Judea before being sent to the temple in Jerusalem (Smith, 2023).

### **The Interpretation of Luke 17:12 - 14**

#### **Greek Text:**

12. Καὶ εἰσερχομένου αὐτοῦ εἰς τινα κώμην, ἀπήντησαν [αὐτῷ] δέκα λεπροὶ ἄνδρες, οἱ ἔστησαν πόρρωθεν. 13 Καὶ αὐτοὶ ἤραν φωνὴν λέγοντες, Ἰησοῦ ἐπιστάτα, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς. 14 καὶ ἰδὼν, εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Πορευθέντες ἐπιδείξατε ἑαυτοὺς τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν, καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ ὑπάγειν αὐτοὺς, ἐκαθαρίσθησαν.

#### **English Translation:**

12. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance 13. and lifted up their voices, and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us”. 14 When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the Priests”. And as they went, they were cleansed.

On entering certain village, Jesus was met by ten lepers in Luke 17:12. Κωμην (kome), meaning a hamlet, village. It could be regarded properly as a common sleeping – place where labourers in the fields can return to. It can be used also of a small town as Bethsaida in Mark 8: 23, 26cf; John 1:45. The word appears seven times in Mark, four times in Matthew, twelve times in Luke - Acts and three times in John. Places called Κωμαὶ are Bethany (John 11:1, 30), Bethsaida (Mark 8:23, 26), Bethlehem (John 7:42) and Emmaus (Luke 24:13). In Acts 8:25, κωμη is used of dwellers of a village. These ten lepers must have met Jesus outside the village, segregated by the reason of their unhappy malady, leprosy from other human beings in line with the laws of Moses in Leviticus 15:46 which says, “He is unclean, he shall dwell alone without the camp shall his habitation be” (KJV). Ellicott (2023) opines that the certain village that was not named lied on the border – land of the two provinces. It is probably significant that Jesus took neither of the normal caravan roads, one of which passed through Samaria, the other through Peraea. For Gill (2023), it was not clear whether Samaria or Galilee that Jesus entered, perhaps, it bothered on both because the Jews and Samaritans were there and since Jesus was passing both places, the leprous Samaritan was in company of Jewish lepers.

The distance was the one that Jesus could hear them. It was clear that Jesus did not go close to them. The dreadful malady of leprosy was a terrible scourge of Mid-East cities in the time of Jesus (Walton, 2022). The disease itself was considered a type of sin, not necessarily related to specific sins of the victims. The reason they kept a distance was because they were forbidden by law and custom to come near those who were healthy for fear of infecting them. They were therefore not socially fit. They could not mingle with other people. The lepers were ostracized from the society as a result of the dreaded disease (Evans, 2023). In this case of the lepers standing far away, there was no room for running and falling at Jesus feet as in other cases of healing (Garnes – Howe, 2023). They were duty bound to stay clear from the roads that would enable them to see travelers who passed by (Pett, 2023).

The ten lepers lifted up their voices in order to express their dire need of being cured by Jesus of their leprosy. Adam (2023) argues that as the ten lepers were together in their predicament, so also they were in one accord in lifting up their voices to cry for mercy from Jesus. Through lifting up of voices, ideas and emotions are communicated.

The lepers in their predicament made a common plea. Their suffering has brought them to a common level, making them to ignore their racial hatred. Brown (2023) supports this by stating that the lepers who were regarded as outcasts forgot the fierce national antipathy of Jews

and Samaritan and came together as a result of their common misery, ἤραν φωνήν (eran phone) “lifted up their voices”, ἤραν (eran) is derived from αἶρω (airo) meaning to lift up or raise up (Strong, 2006).

The Greek word ἐπιστάτα (epistata) in Luke 17:13 is derived from ἐπιστάτης (epistates), meaning a commander, an overseer, a master. In this verse 13, master is used, like the disciples addressing Jesus, not from the fact that he was a teacher but because of his authority. The word occurs basically in miracle stories, except this one in Luke 17:13. It is the disciples who address Jesus in this fashion. In the synoptic Gospels, the estimate equivalents of the word are ράββι (rabbi), κυριε (kurie), and διδασκαλος (didaskalos) which means master. The latter two are also used by Luke, while he tries to avoid the usual transliteration ράββι used by the other Evangelists. No specific Hebrew or Aramaic is known to be the groundwork for ἐπιστάτης, nor does the form in secular Greek require a distinct translation. The term ἐπιστάτης defines, for instance an overseer over flocks, an Egyptian taskmaster (Exo. 1:11; 5:4 LXX), a leader in an athletic society, the supervisor of a temple or the governor of a city (Balz and Schneider, 1990).

The derivation of the word and the context in which Luke uses it implies a distinction in meaning. While Luke used κυριε of messianic honour, for example in Luke 2:11; 5:12; 7:6 and διδασκαλέ of Jesus’ teaching authority in Luke 10:25; 18:18; 20:21, ἐπιστάτης is used of Jesus in his authoritative position within a specific class, his disciples. This is buttressed by the fact that we find ἐπιστάτης, almost solely in the mouth of the disciples and the instances from secular Greek correlate with this. As a result, the term refers to Jesus’ authority to instruct and to his unique task for the group of disciples he has gathered. Luke 17:13 tends to omit this interpretation because Jesus is called upon here from a group that is independent of him and the lepers required help from him. But the obstacle is eliminated by supposing what Luke intended to express; when the ten lepers begged Jesus for help, it subjected *eo ipso* (by the same act) to his authority. Hence, the term ἐπιστάτης is usually best translated master (Balz and Schneider, 1990).

ἐλέησον (eleeson) is derived from the Greek word ἐλέεω (eleeo), meaning to have compassion, pity, mercy on someone, to succour the afflicted and also to bring help to the downtrodden. It also means to be merciful or to show kindness as in Romans 12:8. In Greek, ἐλέος (elos) is a πάθος (Pathos), which means sensation, feeling and it, is an appeal to emotion. It means emotion aroused by contact with someone who is afflicted. It is a noun, and has to do with concern for the welfare of others. The noun ἐλέος occurs in twenty-seven passages in the New Testament. The verb ἐλέεω occurs in twenty-nine passages in New Testament, none of them in John or Acts. The noun and verb of the word speak of the emotion experienced in the midst of an affliction that has come upon another and the action coming from this emotion. One may conclude that ἐλέος and ἐλείν came into the religious language of the Bible from the secular sphere.

Luke takes up the Old Testament notion of *hesed* in its original sense of the gracious and creative faithfulness of God, particularly in Old Testament citations and hymns which allude to the Old Testament. The promised mercy (*hesed*) of God which was experienced in Israel’s salvation history reached its completion in the gracious self revelation of God among the downtrodden and the poor in the person of Jesus (Bromiley, 2022). The mercy of God healed Epaphroditus from sickness for the sake of Paul in Phil. 2:27. The Greek word ἐλέησον (eleeson) depicts the fact that it was a definite request made by the ten lepers in comparing it with that of the leper in Luke 5:12 – 13 whose remarkable words are given in similar terms by all the synoptics.

Stackpole (2022), avows that the Gospel of Luke normally deserves the title “the Gospel of mercy in the sense that the theme of God’s merciful love actually ties the whole Gospel together from beginning to the end”. Mercy is its “leitmotif”. It also contains a cluster of parables in chapter 15 which are peculiar to it, which particularly highlight the merciful love of God. Furthermore, it places special emphasis on the universal scope of mercy, portraying it as a distinctive characteristic of the kingdom of God dawning upon the world through Jesus Christ. Luke specially focuses on the greatest attribute of God-mercy. Jesus showed his mercy on the ten lepers who were medically, socially and religiously outcasts in the society. Luke demonstrates this mercy of God in ways that the other Gospel writers do not. Probably, he was influenced by his gentile background or maybe because he did not meet Jesus physically in his life’s time. All that he knew about Jesus was given to him by others. He displays the mercy and compassion of God in captivating ways (Salai, 2017).

In Luke 17:14, Jesus said to the ten lepers, “Go and show yourselves to the Priests”. ἐπιδείξατε is derived from the word ἐπιδείκνυμι (epideiknumi) meaning to display physically or mentally. It could also mean to show or bring forth to limelight, or to acknowledge. The significance of the word can be seen in the action of the ten lepers in setting forth themselves before the Priests for inspection. The word is a verb, and used seven times in the New Testament – Matt. 16:1; 22:19; 24:1; Luke 17:14; 20:24; 24:40; and Acts 9:39.

Lazar (2019), avers that the command to them (lepers) to show themselves is implicitly a promise of restoration to health. The term ἱερεῦσιν (ereusin) is derived from the Greek word ἱερος (hierpos), meaning a Priest, one who offers sacrifices to a deity (Strong, 2006). It is used here as a Priest who is in connection with God and dedicates his life to Him alone. The New Testament uses this term thirty-one times of which fourteen are in Hebrews, two times in Mark, three times in Matthew and Luke – Acts eight times, five and three in the Gospels and Acts respectively. In John’s Gospel, it only occurs in 1:19 and in Revelation, it appears three times. It is not in Pauline epistles and the rest of the New Testament, except Hebrews. In Christological usage, Christ is ἱερος (hierous) priest who according to Hebrews 5:6; 7: 17 is priest after the order of Melchizedek. The believers are called priests of God. The instruction of Jesus to the lepers, “show yourselves to the priests’ refers to the legal ordinance (Lev. 13:19) in which it was health-related measures to insure cultic impurity and after the removal of the sickness, to pronounce the restored pure. Jesus’ command is not intended majorly to affirm priestly authority, but rather to demonstrate his authority (Balz and Schneider, 1990).

The Priest in the Greek word ἱερεὺς (hierous) appears in homer in similar sense as mantis; both priest and seer have indwelling powers supporting them to mediate dealings with the gods. for Zeno, the priest must of necessity have correlative knowledge and piety that places him in touch with the power at work in all things. Jesus acknowledged the functions of the (priest) when he told the ten lepers to show themselves to the priests and to present the stipulated gift (Bromiley, 2022).

According to Slobodskoy (2020), the Priests are to examine those who were healed from leprosy and attest to their right to live in cities and towns. The phrase – “show yourselves to the Priests” implies what Moses instructed when anyone’s leprosy goes away. They would go to the priest who would confirm that they were clean and they would be taken through the purifications necessary to be admitted into the society as in the whole chapter of Leviticus 14. This buttresses the fact that Jesus honoured the Law of Moses in his ministry to the Jewish people. He ordered them to do what Moses commanded. Jesus telling them to show themselves to the priest was a usual method when a person was cleansed of leprosy since a priest had to confirm that they were

truly cured before they could start normal life in contact with people in society. The reason for the plural noun ‘Priests’ being used here was because they were ten lepers (Blight, 2008). The observances would be too much for one priest to handle for them. The plural noun ‘Priests’ was used so that each of the cleansed lepers would go to the priest near his own home town or each would go to the Priest convenient for that person, whether a Jew or Samaritan.

ἐκαθαρίσθησαν (ekatharisthesan) is a Greek word derived from καταρῶ (katarizo), which means to cleanse, purify or purge. It is rendered as “make clean”(KSV). It literally means ceremonially or spiritually cleansed (Strong, 2006). It is a verb and it is to make clean or cleanse from physical stains, to remove by cleansing as in this verse (17:14). The frequency of the word appears thirty – one times in New Testament. It could also mean free from the influence of error and sin. Luke showed how the ten lepers obeyed the command of Jesus and went to display themselves to the Priests, they were cleansed from the dreaded disease called leprosy (Hanseman, 2022). Jesus and his disciples lived under the law. He had a duty to follow the law by sending cleansed lepers to the Priests for certification. The Priests in turn would look at their skins and determine whether they were fit to be re-admitted into the community. The Priest certifying a leper clean, he was giving expert evidence to the authenticity of the miracle. As a result, the law through the Priest was testifying to Jesus.

### **Contextualizing Lessons from Luke 17:12 – 14**

It is a basic fact of life that a Priest is to build up the church, which is the body of Christ, gathering people and communities together. A Priest is given authority to serve the people of God, to enable the people have right relationship with Him. This he does majorly by leading and offering pastoral care to them. It also gives spiritual guidance and direction to the people. The church was established principally to heal people, physically and spiritually, hence the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Healing the afflicted is meant to be the focal point of the mission of the church, which means Jesus continues to heal people through the ministry of the Priests.

The significant place of a Priest in the church has a far-reaching impact. Apart from preaching the word of God, he gives comfort to the afflicted as well as bereaved people. He performs scarifies for the remission of sins of the people and serves as agent of God’s mercy and grace to them. The church has been founded by Jesus with the purpose of bringing succor to the people. The Priest is one of these principal channels through which it will come. Therefore, it is imperative for the church, which is the body of Christ to be receptive to the ministry of the Priests. A place of relevance and honour is given to them as was obtainable during the ministry of Jesus. By so doing, there will be a cordial relationship existing between Priest and members of modern day church.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study concludes by asserting the significant place of the Priests in the healing ministry of the church. It is obvious that the Jesus expected the office of the Priest be given prominence. This will create an enabling environment for the manifestation of his power. Jesus told the ten lepers to go and show themselves to the Priests. He recognized their office and their responsibilities in the cleansing of the ten lepers. If the healing ministry of Jesus must blossom in the contemporary church, then the Priest’s status must be given eminence.

### **Recommendations**

The paper recommends the following:

- i. Biblical teachings on the significance of the Priests in healings should be emphasized.
- ii. Negative behaviours towards Priest by members of church should be discouraged.



- iii. The contemporary churches should be made to know that the Priest functions as mediator of equilibrium between holy and profane in human society.
- iv. The Nigerian society should be made to understand that without the duties of Priest, positive inter-personal relationship is hindered.

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