

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Wednesday, November 26, 2014
Thanksgiving Eve**

THE INGREDIENTS OF GRATITUDE

Luke 17:11-19

The story of the miraculous healing of ten lepers by Jesus, and the subsequent return of only one of the ten, is unique to the Gospel of Luke. Like the parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:28-37) and the prodigal son (15:11-32), as well as the visit of Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha (10:38-42) and Zaccheus' life-changing encounter with Him (19:1-10), the story of the healing of these ten lepers is not found in any of the other New Testament Gospels.

This is one of the “go-to” passages of Scripture around Thanksgiving or whenever the theme is the importance of thankfulness. Though it may be familiar to you, let's look at a few of the details.

ON THE WAY TO JERUSALEM

We notice first that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem (17:11). The journey of Jesus to Jerusalem is a major theme in all four Gospels, but especially in Luke. Already in Luke 9:51, we read that “when the days drew near for Him to be taken up” to heaven, Jesus “set His face to go to Jerusalem” (ESV). Jesus knew that His mission from the Father – His destiny – was to go to Jerusalem, there to suffer and die for our sins, and then to rise again from the dead as the conqueror of sin and death, and the Lord of all. His destination – Jerusalem – and His destiny as the heaven-sent Savior of sinners, were integrally connected. Jesus was not going to Jerusalem as a tourist or pilgrim. He was headed there to lay down His life as an atoning sacrifice – the *only* truly atoning sacrifice – for our sins. Which is a reason for thanksgiving at every moment always and forever. For in His identification with us in the incarnation, in Jesus' suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, God has given us a gift we will never deserve and can never repay. Don't ever take it for granted. Think about it. Meditate on it. And be thankful.

TEN LEPERS

Now, back to the story. As Jesus enters an unidentified village, He is recognized by these ten lepers who call out to Him for help. They ask simply for mercy. But we can safely assume that what they really, truly wanted was to be healed. They wanted to be cleansed from this disease that had taken over their lives. They desperately longed to be delivered from the nightmarish existence to which they had been sentenced.

Lepers, of course, were outcasts, forced to leave their homes and families and communities. They were shunned by society. They were not permitted to mingle with other people. They were required by law to stay at a distance from the rest of the populace. It was a horrible way to live, if you could call it “living.”

What happens when they call out to Jesus? He doesn't heal them instantly. Instead, He tells them to go and be examined by the priests, which was the protocol in the Jewish law when a person was cured of leprosy. It was the responsibility of the priests, in situations like this, to examine and declare a person free of leprosy, and thus free to return home and re-enter society.

AS THEY WENT, THEY WERE HEALED

So, Jesus tells this band of brothers to go and do what the law requires. "And as they went," Luke says, "they were healed" (17:14). As they carried out the instructions given by Jesus, as they obeyed His word, they were healed. Their obedience was a sign of their faith. To a man, all ten of them responded to Jesus in faith. Whether it made sense to them or not, they did as He said. They demonstrated their faith in Jesus by their action. In telling them to go to the priests, Jesus is asking them to act as though they have already been cured. While they are on the way, it happens. They are healed. All of them.

ONE COMES BACK

You know what happens next. One of the ten, when he realizes he has been healed, stops in his tracks, does a 180, and comes running back to Jesus, dancing, jumping, singing and shouting His gratitude to God. He kneels at the feet of Jesus, more grateful than he knew how to express. "He couldn't thank (Jesus) enough" (17:16, *MSG*). Only one comes back. And he is a Samaritan. There was a centuries-long racial and religious animus between Jews and Samaritans. The concept of a "good" Samaritan was completely foreign to the world view of the Jews. "Good" and "Samaritan" did not belong in the same sentence, they thought. There was nothing good about Samaritans, they thought. And yet, only this Samaritan among the ten men healed by Jesus comes back to say thanks.

That Jesus healed this Samaritan leper along with his comrades in suffering, some or all of whom may or may not have been Samaritans or other foreigners, too, is dramatic and irrefutable evidence that nobody – whoever they are, wherever they are and wherever they are from, whatever their ethnic heritage or the color of their skin, and whatever their status in society may be, nobody is beyond the reach of God's grace. *Nobody*. And that is an awfully good thing, because nobody is without the need for God and His grace. I'm not. You're not. The Pope is not. The best and most devoted follower of Christ in the world today – or ever – is not.

We all need it. We all need this grace that is given free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Which is us. And all the rest of humankind. The fact that God is gracious and that His grace does truly abound to us, not only in salvation but in all of life, including the hard parts, should motivate us to be thankful and to give thanks to God at all times and in everything.

WHAT ABOUT THE NINE?

Only one of the ten came back. The other nine were healed, too. They may have been thankful for what Jesus did for them, too. But if they were, they didn't say it or show it. They had an opportunity to tell Jesus how grateful they were, and they missed it. They coulda, woulda, and shoulda, but they didn't. We don't know why only the one came back to say thanks to Jesus. But I think we know how important it is to seize the moment, to take hold of the opportunity to give thanks to God and to express our gratitude to those who have blessed us, and how easy it is to let the opportunity slip through our fingers.

It is not hard to see ourselves in the nine who, for whatever reason, didn't stop and come back to say thanks to Jesus. We can easily get so wrapped up in our own lives that we take God's blessings for granted. We can get so busy with this and that and the other thing that we forget to stop and say thanks to God for all His gifts to us. It can happen to anyone anywhere, I think. But I also think we are especially vulnerable to it here in the high-octane environment of Washington.

THANKSGIVING PLEASES GOD

It should be obvious from the way He reacts in this situation that Jesus enjoys genuine gratitude. God takes pleasure in the gratitude and praises of His people. God is blessed when we give thanks to Him for all His blessings to us. We don't bless God in the same way that He blesses us, of course. God does not need any blessing from us. But we are more desperately in need of His blessing at every moment of life than we can imagine. God is pleased when we acknowledge the blessings and gifts of grace we have received from His hand, and give thanks to Him with a truly grateful heart.

SOUL KEEPING

Mary Sue and I have been slowly digesting John Ortberg's newest book, *Soul Keeping*. As you might imagine, it is concerned with the proper care of the soul, which Ortberg says is "the most important part of you." (The sub-title of the book is *Caring for the Most Important Part of You*.) In the first part of the book he talks about "What the Soul Is" and the importance of attending to it. This is followed by ten chapters in which he writes about "What the Soul Needs." The soul, he says, needs a keeper (ch. 7). The soul needs a center (ch. 8). The soul needs a future (ch. 9). The soul needs to be with God (ch. 10). The soul needs rest (ch. 11). The soul needs freedom (ch. 12). The soul needs blessing (ch. 13). The soul needs satisfaction (ch. 14). And the soul needs gratitude (ch. 15). Which is to say, an attitude of gratitude to God and to others is essential to the health of your soul.

THREE INGREDIENTS

"More gratitude," Ortberg writes, "will not come from acquiring more things or experiences" (I think most of us know this deep down in our hearts, even as we knock ourselves out to acquire more things and experience more experiences) ... "but from more of an awareness of God's presence and His goodness" (*Soul Keeping*, 170). He suggests that gratitude always

involves three factors. I'll call them the "ingredients of gratitude." All three ingredients are rooted in the Latin word *bene*, which means "good." A *benediction*, for example, is literally a "good word," which is what a spoken blessing is.

BENEFIT

The first ingredient is a *benefit*, a gift of one kind or another that you believe to be good. David expresses this idea in Psalm 103, where He says:

Praise the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all His benefits –
 who forgives all your sins
 and heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
(Psalm 103:2-5a)

Talk about a great benefits package! Pretty hard – no, not pretty hard but impossible to beat this. The thing to remember, as Ortberg reminds, is that *God* is the One who does all this, the One who gives us all these benefits.

The ten lepers who cried out to Jesus for mercy received from Him a benefit – their healing – that radically changed the trajectory of their lives.

Think about the benefits or blessings you have received in life from God and from others as well – from your wife or your husband, parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, teachers, coaches, neighbors, friends, co-workers, bosses, mentors, the church, and on and on it goes. Take time to count your blessings. Name them one by one. Write them down. It is something I need to do.

BENEFACTOR

Any kind of benefit received, from God or others, is the first ingredient of gratitude. Second, Ortberg says, "gratitude requires that there be a *benefactor*" (171). What is a benefactor? A benefactor is someone, some organization or institution that does good. "To be truly grateful you must not only recognize the benefits or gifts that come your way, but that they are not just random acts; they are not accidents.

As Christians we affirm that our benefits come ultimately from God, who loves us and cares about our needs. The Bible says: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). Our blessings are not self-generated. We are not self-sufficient. We are eternally dependent on God, our heavenly Benefactor, though we are so quick, so prone to forget. Moses warned the people of Israel about this in Deuteronomy 8. As he talked about the abundance that would be theirs in the Promised Land, Moses said: "When you have eaten and

are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land He has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God ... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:10-11a, 12-14a, 17-18b).

Sounds a lot like America, doesn't it? Do not forget your heavenly Benefactor, or the earthly benefactors who have blessed you.

Knowing that we have a heavenly Benefactor who is at work for good in our lives moment by moment is a tremendous advantage we have over those who don't have a relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. G. K. Chesterton wrote this about one major difference between an atheist and a true Christian: “The worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank. The converse of this proposition is also true The great saint may be said to mix all his thoughts with thanks. All goods look better when they look like gifts ...” (which they are). “It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the man who really knows that he cannot pay his debt (to God) will be forever paying it ... (by) throwing things ... into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks” (Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 78-80).

What a Benefactor the ten lepers had in Jesus, who cared enough about them to heal them and set them free from being held hostage by a terrible disease.

BENEFICIARY

Here is the third ingredient: *A beneficiary*, which, of course, refers to the one who receives the benefit(s) from the benefactor. With God as our Benefactor, we are beneficiaries who receive good gifts from Him. Ortberg writes: “You are the beneficiary of the benefits of a God who has your best interests at heart, and this is going on all the time. When we take that for granted or believe we deserve His gifts, then we are no longer grateful; you can't be grateful for something you believe you are entitled to ... This,” he continues, “is where many of us fail the gratitude test, because we tend to ... believe all that we have was gained by our own resourcefulness. Or that we're entitled to the blessings in our lives. But gratitude always comes from a posture of humility” (*Soul Keeping*, 171-172).

A sense of entitlement will always poison the well from which gratitude comes. Believing that you deserve all the blessings you receive, or that you are more deserving than someone else whose blessings you covet, will blind you to the goodness and generosity of God. And it will cause the flower of gratitude in your heart to wither up and die. Like the roots of bitterness (Hebrews 12:15), if you allow the roots of entitlement to grow up, it will cause trouble and damage your soul and relationships.

The ten lepers – not just the one who came back to say thank you to Jesus, but all ten of them – were the beneficiaries of Jesus' compassion, grace, and healing power. He healed them all. But only one came back to say thanks.

As beneficiaries of abundant spiritual, material, physical, and interpersonal benefits from the hand and heart of the Divine Benefactor – the triune God – may we come to Him often, even continually, and gladly, in our hearts to give Him our thanks and praise. May we also take time to express our gratitude to those who have blessed us in particular ways.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.