

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 15, 2012**

A LIFESTYLE OF THANKSGIVING

Luke 17:11-19

Ten lepers cry out to Jesus for mercy. They keep their distance, as lepers were required by law to do. They ask Jesus to have pity on them. They figure it is not necessary to be more specific in their plea for help. It must be intuitively obvious to the most casual observer what they want, what they need, what they desire so desperately. And Jesus is more than just a casual observer.

Jesus does have mercy on them. He does not ignore their cry for help. He tells them to do what the Jewish law requires in order to be declared “clean” and permitted to re-enter society. He sends them off to see the priests, who, in addition to their other liturgical duties, functioned as health inspectors to certify that the cure had taken place and that the leprosy was gone. Jesus could have healed these men by laying hands on them. He could have healed them simply by speaking a word. Instead, He tests their faith in Him by telling them to go to be examined by the priest. He challenges them, in effect, to act as though they have already been healed. Why would they go to the priest if they have not been cured? To do what Jesus tells them is an act of faith, a sign of their trust in the trustworthiness and power of Jesus.

As the ten lepers obey, it happens. As they are on their way, they are healed. They are cured. The leprosy is gone. One of the ten, when he sees that he has been cured, doesn’t wait for a priest to declare him fit to re-enter society. Instead, he does an immediate 180 and comes running back to Jesus, praising God all the way. He knows his healing is a God-thing. He kneels at the feet of Jesus in humility and gratitude. He can’t thank Jesus enough for giving his life back to him.

Luke tells us in verse 16 that the one who came back to Jesus is a Samaritan, just like the hero in Jesus’ story of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37), the one who came to the aid of a man who had been ambushed by robbers on the Jericho road – robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead. The notion of a “good Samaritan” was offensive to the sensibilities of most Jews. There was a mutual dislike between Jews and Samaritans. But here, once again, out of ten lepers who receive healing, the one who returns to say “thank you” to Jesus is a despised Samaritan. Despised by others, perhaps. But not by Jesus.

Jesus expresses His disappointment that only one out of ten came back to say “thanks.” Only one of the ten returned to express his gratitude to Jesus.

To this one who has come back, Jesus says: “Get up and go. Your faith has made you well” (17:19). Literally, He says: “Your faith has *saved* you” (italics added). The word Jesus uses is *sozo*, a verb which means “to save.” Ten men were healed. Ten men were cured. Ten men were made clean. Nine of them were declared clean by the priests. One – the one who came back – received something more. He was declared “saved” by the Son of God. Not only was

his leprosy gone. Not only was it well with his body. It was well with his soul as well. Through faith in Jesus, the true Son of God and Savior of sinners, this man received the gift of salvation. No doubt he went back home, back to his family and neighbors, continuing to give thanks and praise to God for what Jesus had done for him. Unlike the other nine, his was a faith that said “thank you.”

Often, when we read a story like this one, we look for the moral of the story. The moral of this story is obvious, isn't it? Don't be like the nine who neglected, for whatever reason, to come back and say “thank you” to Jesus. Don't be like them. We should be like the one who did come back. We should be like the one who said “thank you.” We should be like the one who was grateful and showed it.

The moral of a story usually has a *should* or an *ought* in it. It tells us something we should or shouldn't do, something we ought or ought not to do. But the gospel is not about *should's* or *ought's*. If all we take away from the teaching and ministry of Jesus – or from the message of the Bible as a whole – is a string of *should's* and *ought's*, a list of *do's* and *don'ts*, then we have completely missed the point. Of course, Jesus wants us to be thankful people. Of course, God wants us to give thanks for the good gifts He gives, for the blessings large and small He imparts to us. The Bible instructs, even commands, us to “give thanks to the Lord” and to infuse our whole life with a spirit of thanksgiving.

NEVER A TIME

There is never a time when it is not time to be thankful. There is *never* a time when it is not time to give thanks to God for all His goodness to us. *Never a time*. But the gospel is not about what we should or shouldn't do. It is not about what we ought or ought not to do. It is not about anything we can do, or anything we have to do, in order to make ourselves acceptable to God. It is not about earning God's approval by what we do or say. Giving thanks to God for His blessings does not make us acceptable to God. The leper who returned to Jesus was not saved because he came back to say “thank you.” He came back to say “thank you” because he had been given the gift of saving faith. Salvation, then as now, is all by grace. It is all grace. Gratitude – thanksgiving – is the response to grace.

I know the calendar says it is April, not November. It is springtime, not harvest. But it is intuitively obvious, I trust, that God does not wish us to restrict thanksgiving to a particular day or season of the year. It is intuitively obvious, I trust, that a spirit of thankfulness in response to grace is one of the core qualities God desires to see cultivated and expressed in the lives of His children: a spirit of thankfulness that produces a lifestyle of thanksgiving. So, whether it is April or July or January or November, it is always the right time to give thanks. And always the right time to *live* thanks.

EUCCHARISTEO

Do you know Ann Voskamp? She lives on a farm in the Mennonite countryside of southwestern Ontario, Canada, with her husband (whom she affectionately calls “the Farmer”) and their six children. She is also the author of *The New York Times* bestseller, *One*

Thousand Gifts, which is “an invitation to wake up to God’s everyday blessings” by cultivating the gift of *eucharisteo*. *Eucharisteo* is the Greek word in the New Testament that means “to give thanks.” Jesus, you remember, gave thanks (*eucharisteo*) before breaking the bread and giving it to His disciples during the last supper. At the tomb of Lazarus, in the passage of Scripture (John 11) we looked at together last Sunday, Jesus stopped to pray, giving thanks to the Father (*eucharisteo*) for having heard and for answering His prayer. And then – the miracle of a dead man rising! Out came Lazarus – alive! When a crowd of thousands followed Jesus to the far side of the Sea of Galilee, having witnessed or heard about the healing miracles He had done, Jesus took what was not nearly enough – a boy’s offering of five small barley loaves and two small fish, gave thanks for it (*eucharisteo*), then gave it to the crowd – and it was more than enough to feed a crowd of five thousand men, plus the women and children who came with them (John 6:1-12). Giving thanks (*eucharisteo*) was not an afterthought in the life of Jesus. It was in His DNA.

A friend “dared” Ann Voskamp to make a list of one thousand blessings in her life, to write a gift list not of gifts she wants, not a “wish list,” but a list of gifts she has already received, a list of everyday blessings she can name and for which she can give thanks. In doing so, she would learn to cultivate the habit of *eucharisteo*. Her book is one outcome of the dare. It is the result of her quest to identify and give thanks for the ordinary and not-always-so-ordinary gifts found in daily life.

She quotes Bible scholar F. B. Meyer, who, about a hundred years ago, made this observation about receiving the gifts God has for us:

I used to think that God’s gifts were on shelves one above the other, and that the taller we grew in Christian character the easier we should reach them. I find now that God’s gifts are on shelves one beneath the other, and that it is not a question of growing taller but of stooping lower, and that we have to go down, always down, to get His best gifts.

(Quoted in *One Thousand Gifts*, p. 171)

Not taller but lower. A spirit of gratitude grows best in the fertile soil of humility. The habit of *eucharisteo* is best cultivated when we live in a daily awareness of our desperate need for grace, and of how generous and gracious God is to bless our lives with gifts undeserved and grace-moments unplanned. Unplanned by us, that is.

THANKSGIVING AND TRUST

Giving thanks to God, Ann Voskamp says, builds trust in God. We count our blessings and discover Who can be counted on. Living a lifestyle of intentional thanksgiving becomes an unintentional test of the trustworthiness of God. Counting our blessings and remembering with thankfulness what God has already done for us teaches us to trust God for the present and the future. Trust, writes Voskamp, is the bridge that carries us from yesterday to tomorrow, a bridge built with planks of thanks (pp. 150-153).

I don't think I ever thought of it that way before. But it makes sense. Thanksgiving builds trust, for it reminds us of how blessed we are and how good God is. Thanksgiving leads us to "trust in the Lord with all (our) heart" (Proverbs 3:5). It prompts us to "trust in Him at all times" and to "pour out (our) hearts to Him, for God is our refuge" (Psalm 62:8).

A lifestyle of thanksgiving builds trust. It builds trust in God. It provides more and more proof of the goodness and trustworthiness of God.

IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

The apostle Paul urges us and all of God's people, all of Christ's followers, to live this lifestyle of thanksgiving. In Colossians 2:6-7, for example, he writes:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him,
rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught,
and overflowing with thankfulness (*eucharistia*).

And then in Colossians 3:15 and 17:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
since ... you were called to peace. And be thankful (*eucharistoi*).
Whatever you do (i.e., in everything), whether in word or deed,
do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,
Giving thanks (*eucharisteo*) to God the Father through Him.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Paul gives this charge:

Be joyful always (*pantote*); pray continually;
give thanks (*eucharisteo*) in all circumstances (*en panti*),
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

THE DIALECT OF THANKSGIVING

Paul also gives these exhortations in Ephesians 5. First, in verses 3 and 4, he tells the believers in Ephesus that, as followers of Christ, there is no place in their lives (or in the life of any Christian today) for even a hint of sexual immorality, or impurity, or any kind of lust or covetousness. On top of that, there is no room in their lives (or in the life of any Christian today) for obscene language, for talking dirty, for suggestive comments or crude jokes. All of these, Paul says, are "improper for God's holy people" and "out of place" in our lives. Instead of and in contrast to all of these, he says in verse 4, let there be thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). Eugene Peterson expresses it this way:

Don't allow love to turn into lust, setting off a downhill slide
into sexual promiscuity, filthy practices, or bullying greed....
Don't talk dirty or silly. That kind of talk doesn't fit our style.

Thanksgiving is our dialect.
(Ephesians 5:3-4, *The Message*)

“Thanksgiving is our dialect.” Thanksgiving was the dialect of the healed leper who came running back to Jesus to say thanks. In the same way, God wants us – you and me – to be fluent in the dialect of thanksgiving.

So I wonder today: How fluent are you? Do you speak the dialect of thanksgiving daily? Are you living a lifestyle of thanksgiving? If you were arrested and charged with being a thankful person, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

ALWAYS AND FOR EVERYTHING

Second, after urging the Ephesians in verse 18 not to get drunk but to be filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul goes on to say in verse 20 that we are “always and for everything” to give thanks (*eucharisteo*) to God the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Always and for everything*.

John Stott cautions not to take the words “for everything” literally. We cannot thank God for absolutely everything. In fact, this world is full of things, events, and tragedies which call for anything but thanksgiving. Thank God for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, FL? No way. Give thanks for the scourge of modern-day slavery and sex trafficking? Never. Give thanks for the shooting rampage at Virginia Tech that took place five years ago tomorrow? No. Thank God for the sinking of the *Titanic* and the deaths of more than 1,500 passengers in the North Atlantic one hundred years ago today? I don’t think so. Give thanks for the destructive force of tornadoes, the destructive power of adultery, the destructive power of alcoholism, the power of cancer to destroy healthy cells in the body, or the degrading and destructive power of pornography? No. No. No. No. And no. Not on your life.

Praise God for evil? No. But we are to trust fully in God. We are to thank Him for every good gift, every blessing, large or small, common or uncommon, that comes to us. We are to thank Him as well for His loving providence, for His wise and gracious sovereignty, by which He can bring good out of evil and bring His eternal purposes to fulfillment.

“IT IS GOOD”

Let me tell you a story I’ve told once before, several years ago, about a tribal king in Africa and a friend of his. This friend had an unusually sunny disposition. No matter what happened to him, whether it appeared on the surface to be positive or negative, he was always cheerful. He always found a reason to be thankful and to say: “It is good. It is good.”

On one occasion this friend was on a hunting expedition with the king. He would load the king’s guns for him. He made an error in loading one of the guns, and when the king fired it, the king’s thumb was blown off. The friend offered his characteristic response: “This is good.” To which the king said: “No, it is not.” And the king had his friend put in jail.

About a year later, on another hunting expedition, the king was captured by cannibals who took him to their village. As they prepared to “roast” him over a bonfire, they noticed the king was missing a thumb. Believing it was bad luck to eat anyone who was less than whole physically, they untied the king and let him go.

On his way home, the king remembered the hunting accident a year earlier in which he had lost his thumb, and felt remorse for the way he had treated his friend. So he went to the jail and said to this friend: “You were right. It *was* good that my thumb was blown off.” And he told his friend about what had happened. The king said: “I’m sorry for putting you in jail for so long. It was wrong of me to do this.”

To which his friend said: “No, this is good.”

“What do you mean, this is good?” the king asked. “How could it possibly be good that I sent you, my dear friend, to jail for a whole year?”

The man smiled and said: “King, I have all my members. I have all my parts. If I had not been in jail, I would have been out hunting with you. This is good!”

Sometimes what seems to us to be not good turns out to be something God uses for our good. And what does God desire of us, in response to all His goodness to us? A heart and a lifestyle of thanksgiving and trust. Always. In every way and for every good thing. An ungrateful Christian is a contradiction in terms. Thanklessness – or a grumbling, complaining, critical spirit – is unworthy and incompatible with living as a son or daughter of the King of kings.

The one leper who spoke the dialect of thanksgiving – he is the one who received the greatest blessing. He knew who deserved his thanks. And giving thanks to Jesus became the most important thing in his life.

All of life, my friends, is grace. It is all grace. Everything good in life is grace. And the life of a Christian is gratitude. From beginning to end, it is thankfulness and trust. May it be so in us, now and always, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.