

“Giving Thanks”
Luke 17:11-19
November 23, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning we’re going to take a break from our series in Deuteronomy, which we’ll come back to next Sunday.

But this morning, our focus (for understandable reasons) will be on the theme of giving thanks.

And for that, we’ll look at Luke 17:11-19.

And as we do, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Luke writes:

^{17:11} On the way to Jerusalem he [that is, Jesus] was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, “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. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, you are our portion,
and so we commit ourselves to keep your word.
We ask you with all our hearts to show us your favor,
and be gracious with us according to your promise.
Turn our feet to your testimonies,
and as we hear your word,
give us a sense of urgency to conform ourselves to it, without delay.
Grant this we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:57-60]

Introduction

Our text this morning is a classic one. It's a text we often teach to children. But it's perhaps one that we don't really reflect upon enough as adults.

But as I thought about it this week, I was struck that, maybe especially as adults, we need to hear and reflect on this passage. And with Thanksgiving just around the corner, this is probably an especially good time to do it.

And if we take the time to dig into this text, I think what we see is that the proper response to God's grace is gratitude, and though several things may tempt us away from giving God proper thanks, expressing gratitude to the Lord brings us closer to him, and so we should be intentional about responding rightly to God's blessings.

Let me say that again: The proper response to God's grace is gratitude, and though several things may tempt us away from giving God proper thanks, expressing gratitude to the Lord brings us closer to him, and so we should be intentional about responding rightly to God's blessings.

There's a lot there. So let's break it down together.

The Proper Response to God's Grace is Gratitude

First, the proper response to God's grace is gratitude.

When someone – when anyone – gives us a gift, we generally agree that we should respond with thanks. We should respond with gratitude.

A gift is something someone was not obligated to give you. You didn't earn it from them. They didn't owe it to you. They chose, out of kindness, out of love, out of grace, to give you something just to bless you. And the right response is to offer them our thanks.

That's true in general. And it's a truth at the heart of our text.

The leprosy in this passage was probably not a deadly or a mutilating disease. It's not Hansen's Disease – the disease where, over time, parts of the body may fall off, leading to deformity. Leprosy in the Bible, as the ESV footnote points out, covers several skin diseases discussed in Leviticus 13. And their greatest effect was social. The person with leprosy was ceremonially unclean, and their uncleanness was contagious. And so they had to be set apart – they had to live apart – from everyone else, even their loved ones. Even here, in verse 12, Luke notes that they stood at a distance from Jesus. They could not get close to non-leprous people.

In the ancient world, such leprosy may not lead to physical death, but it did lead to social death, which is its own kind of devastation. [Green, 619-620, 623]

These men were cut off from society, cut off from temple worship, cut off from close proximity to family. They were living a life of social death.

And in verse 13, when Jesus passes by, they lift up their voices and cry out: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

Now that itself is a striking confession of faith. The term “Master” is really only used in Luke’s gospel when acknowledging that someone has authority to perform miraculous deeds. [Green, 623] So these men are confessing a special kind of faith in Jesus.

And in response, Jesus calls them to show forth even greater faith. He says to them “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

Now, the reason this is a call to even greater faith is because the priests couldn’t do anything to help with, or fix, leprosy. All they could do is diagnose it – to look a person over and declare whether they were clean or still leprous. [Green, 624]

And so, by sending these ten men to the priests, Jesus is saying that he will heal them ... but he hasn’t done it yet. Instead, he’s asking them to act in faith that he will heal them. If they looked down at their skin, they were still leprous. But Jesus tells them to go to the priests as if they were healed – to go based on faith, not sight, trusting that Jesus would heal them, even though he hasn’t yet. And they go. [Morris, 275] They demonstrate extraordinary faith.

And as they act in faith, Jesus heals them. Verse 14 says: “And as they went they were cleansed.” Jesus has performed a miracle. He has healed them. And in that healing he’s restored not just their physical bodies, but also their social place in the community. This is a life-changing miracle for these men. [Green, 624]

But then, of the ten, we’re told that only one returned to give thanks. And here lies the central focus of this passage.

Because most of us don’t really need to be told that that’s a problem, do we? Most of us know that when someone gives you such a gift – to restore your life when it was in ruins – then the right response is to give thanks.

We all know this.

As one theologian has put it, gratitude is our creaturely counterpart to God’s grace. [Karl Barth, cited in Greene-McCreight, 83] When God shows us grace, gratitude is the right response from us. In fact, God’s grace should always be met by gratitude from us.

And most of us here would agree with that.

But at the same time, most of us here don’t really do it.

Most of us quite often fail to give thanks. Most of us are more often like the nine than we are like the one.

We receive blessings from God all the time. But we give God heartfelt and sincere thanks much less often.

Like the nine, we can maybe even seem at times to have great faith ... and then still fail to also have gratitude. [Morris, 276] Though one should always go with the other ... our text reminds us that often it doesn't.

So why doesn't it? Why is being grateful so difficult?

Several Things May Tempt Us Away From Giving God Proper Thanks

Well ... there are many ways to answer that question – not least of which is simply considering the nature of human sin. But rather than diving into the depths of every possible answer, let's try to enter into the concrete details of our text.

We're not told what kept the other nine from returning to Jesus, but Luke gives us enough detail that we might speculate – we might imaginatively enter the text. And that imaginative speculation, based on the details Luke gives us, can, I think, yield some spiritual fruit.

Because as we consider the nine, we can see that while the proper response to God's grace is gratitude, several things may tempt us away from giving God proper thanks.

Think of these men. What temptations might have kept them from returning to Jesus to give him thanks?

Well, one thing might be a superficial vision of obedience. Because, on a level, the nine could argue that they were actually obeying Jesus. After all, Jesus told them in verse 14 to go and show themselves to the priests. And presumably, that's what they went to do. So they obeyed, right? How could Jesus be displeased with them?

And yet he was. And it makes sense.

And we too can be tempted to fall into their flawed way of thinking.

We can fall into this way of thinking where we even wonder, as good, diligent Christians, should we really take the time to give thanks? Stop what we're doing, and turn to God, and spend time thanking him and acknowledging his gifts, instead of being productive? If we're honest, quite often we believe we're too busy obeying God to stop what we're doing to thank him. There's so much to do, and there's just not enough time for this mushy spirituality of stopping everything to spend time in dedicated prayers of thanks to God.

Now, that reasoning might sound silly (and it is), but it's a lie that many of us in this room have told ourselves many times before.

And the reason it can feel plausible to us is because so often we believe that God is more interested in what we can do for him than he is in us having an actual relationship with him. And prayers of thanks are relational, not productive.

Now, obedience and good works are part of how we show our love for God. And they're important. But they're not everything. Obedience and good works alone cannot make a relationship.

The spouse who gives many good things to their husband or wife and does many good things to serve them ... but who doesn't take the time to give them themselves ... doesn't stop to simply relate to them ... never stops to simply look at them, and see them, and sincerely thank them ... the spouse who approaches their marriage in that kind of superficial, task-based way ... soon won't have much of a marriage at all. Because there will be no relationship to it.

God wants our service, he wants our good works. But he also wants – he especially wants – us. That includes many things, but one of them is for us to truly stop and reflect on his gifts, and give him thanks – to fall before him in praise. To offer him ourselves in relationship. But far too often we instead choose superficial obedience – tasks rather than relationship.

That's one temptation we can fall into, and that the nine may have experienced as well.

But there are others.

One of those others is that the nine lepers, on getting this one blessing, may simply have been so focused on the next blessing they wanted that they failed to even think about stopping and thanking Jesus for what he did.

Think of these men. We don't know for how long they've been cut off from close contact with their communities – cut off from close contact with their families. On one level we can understand that once healed, they would rush to the priest to certify their cleansing and then rush home to see and embrace their family, their friends, their loved ones back home – rush to enter into temple worship. They may have failed to give thanks to Jesus because they were so focused on the next thing they wanted.

And the things they wanted were probably not in and of themselves bad. But prioritizing the next thing they wanted over giving thanks and praise to God ... well, that was bad. Because the only reason they could even seek the next thing they wanted was because of the tremendous gift Jesus had already given them. And to fail to thank him was a failure to acknowledge and live in light of that reality.

But that's what the nine do.

And so often we do the same.

How often, when we desperately want something, when we plead with God for it, and then God, in his grace gives it to us – how often do we move right on to the next thing, giving God only a brief and perfunctory thanks ... or no thanks at all?

We or someone we love is in the hospital. We pray earnestly for healing. And God heals them. But then, before stopping and truly thanking him – before really stopping and falling before him to acknowledge his kindness and grace, we move on to what's next: How will we settle them back home from the hospital? How will we arrange the transition back to regular life? What appointments do we need to make? What did we miss while attending to all this? Those needs may be real. But far too often we let those kinds of things crowd out the reality of what God has just done for us – we let them keep us from truly stopping, turning back to Jesus, and giving him thanks for what he has done. And so we are like the nine, rather than like the one.

Still other times, the thing that tempts us away from giving God thanks is our pridefully crediting ourselves for what God has done.

Now that might seem absurd in the case of these lepers ... and yet I wonder if it's that hard to believe.

Think of us: Every good thing we have – every gift, every skill, every resource, every bit of strength, even our own existence, is all a gift from God – we only have it because he gave it to us. And yet so often we credit ourselves for those things. We amplify our role, and we ignore his.

And so it's not hard for me to imagine these nine lepers thinking much less of Jesus's miraculous gift ... and focusing more on their faith, their faithfulness, which played a role in receiving that gift, but didn't actually generate it.

And so they – and often we – pat ourselves on the back, rather than turning to God in thanks.

But finally, one other temptation that may have been at work is not just pride when it comes to God ... but arrogance when it comes to other people.

These ten lepers were on their way to the priests. And as they were healed, one of them had the conviction that he should turn back and give thanks to Jesus. My guess is that he probably said it out loud. He probably suggested it to the others too.

But he was a Samaritan. And generally speaking, the Jews looked down on Samaritans. And so if this Samaritan suggested to the Jewish men who were healed that they all turn back to give thanks to Jesus ... it may have been because it was suggested by a Samaritan that the other nine were suspicious even of the idea of doing that.

And once more, as terrible as that might sound, we so often do the same thing.

We are a church of mostly upper-middle class, mostly white, largely well-educated Presbyterians. And there are churches that are far better than we are at expressing thanks to God. We so often have the right words in our hymns and in our liturgies ... but to look at us ... it often can seem like our hearts are not in it.

And yet other Christians, in other settings, in other traditions, and in other denominations often do this so much better.

But those who do it better might be Charismatic ... or Pentecostal ... or more emotional evangelical kinds of churches than we are. They might be less white, less wealthy, even less educated than we are. But they in many cases give thanks to God better than we do.

And in our arrogance ... the background, the denomination, the demographic, the theology or tradition of those who do this better than us, can make us even more resistant to truly expressive thanksgiving towards God – whether on our own, or in our families, or in our churches. Because far from being willing to learn from them, we're worried about being too much like them.

Now some will respond: OK, Pastor Steven, but you know there are a lot of problems in charismatic churches, and Pentecostal Churches, and overly emotional churches, and we need to be careful about how they do things. And you may be right.

But here's the thing: the Jewish lepers could have rightly said the very same thing about the one Samaritan: "Hey, guys, we've got to be careful, because these Samaritans have a lot of problematic beliefs." And they'd be right. But even so, this Samaritan had something to teach the Jews. In this instance Jesus wanted the Jews to follow the example of the Samaritan. But their arrogance may well have kept them from that. And so often, our arrogance has the same effect. It keeps us from learning from other believers who get this right and who could teach us a thing or two about active and engaged thankfulness to the Lord.

So there are temptations towards superficial obedience, temptations involving desiring more, temptations towards crediting ourselves rather than God, temptations towards arrogance in relation to other people, and we could go on ... but what are the temptations for you? When God blesses you, and you don't give thanks to him as you should ... when you look more like the nine than the one ... then what is it that tempts you away from proper thankfulness?

Take a moment and consider that.

While the proper response to God's grace is gratitude, several things may tempt us away from giving God proper thanks.

Expressing Gratitude to the Lord Brings Us Closer to Him

And yet, one thing our text reminds us is that when we fail to thank God, it's not just that we fail to give something to God that we should – as tragic as that is. But we also fail to be blessed by a closer relationship with him.

Because expressing gratitude to the Lord brings us closer to him.

That is, after all, what this Samaritan experienced.

By turning back, by giving praise to Jesus, it's not just that this Samaritan gave something to God – gave praise to Jesus. But he also got something of God. He himself received a deeper relationship with the Lord.

By turning back to Jesus and falling at his feet, this man gets to see something about Jesus that the other men do not get to see. He sees – he recognizes – that Jesus is more than a healer. Jesus is more than a Master. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is worthy of worship, and so he falls down before him. Jesus is the place where the kingdom of God is breaking into the world. [Green, 625]

By turning back to Jesus and falling at his feet, this man gets to hear something from Jesus that the other men do not get to hear. He hears Jesus's words of encouragement, implied in verses 17 and 18. He hears that Jesus was pleased with him. He hears in those words that while others may discount him, Jesus holds him up as an example to the Jews around him. He hears Jesus's words of encouragement.

And then, by turning back to Jesus and falling at his feet, this man receives something the other men did not receive. He receives Jesus's words of assurance. Jesus's words, in verse 19, can be translated, as the ESV footnote points out, as "Your faith has saved you." This man receives words of assurance from the mouth of Jesus that the other nine did not, because he turned back and gave him thanks.

In giving Jesus thanks, this Samaritan received more of Jesus.

And so often the same is true for us. When we turn to Jesus and give him thanks, that act of giving does not deplete us ... but it further fills us ... it does not leave us with less, but gives us more, as Jesus shows us more of himself, as Jesus encourages us, as Jesus assures us of his love.

When we give thanks to God, we get far more than we give. Because that's what God is like. That's how loving a Father he is. Even when we come to give him thanks, he always manages to out-give us.

The proper response to God's grace is gratitude, and though several things may tempt us away from giving God proper thanks, expressing gratitude to the Lord blesses us by bringing us closer to him. That's what we see here.

We Should Be Intentional About Responding Rightly to God's Blessings

Which is all the more reason why we should be intentional about responding rightly to God's blessings.

But what does that intentionality really look like in concrete terms?

Well, there's a lot here we could say. But let's just limit ourselves to what we see in this text – and specifically what we see in verses 15 and 16.

First, we need to see. We read in verse 15 "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed."

The first thing that sets the one leper apart is that he saw. [Green, 624] He took the time to observe the blessing.

That might seem simple. But so often we fail to do it.

We're so focused on what's next, or we're so focused on our challenges, or we're so focused on what we don't have, or we're so focused on what others have, or we're so focused on what we think we deserve, that we don't just stop and see what God has already given us and already done for us.

Stop and see. See the amazing gift it is that God created you at all, when he didn't have to. See the ways he has preserved you. See all the blessings around you that he has given you in this life: material blessings, relational blessings, the people and things he has given you as gifts.

But then, even more so, stop and see the blessings he has given you in Christ: offering himself on the cross, so that you might be forgiven, so that you might be saved, so that you might spend eternity in joy with him.

There is so much to give thanks for. But you won't give thanks for any of it unless you first stop and see it.

Next, after seeing the blessings, we need to "turn" from what we are doing, towards Jesus. We see that in verse 15 – the one leper "turned back."

Giving thanks often means taking time to turn from the thing we were going to do next, and to Jesus. These men were on their way to the priests, then probably to their families. They had something to do – something good to do. But giving proper thanks to Jesus meant taking the time to turn from that, and to Jesus.

We see here how much Jesus values that from the Samaritan. And he values it from us too.

When we see a blessing, we need to turn our attention from all that is around us, and direct it towards Jesus.

And often it's best for us to do that sooner rather than later. As one commentator notes from this passage: "If people do not give thanks quickly, they usually do not do so at all." [Morris, 276]

We need to see. Then we need to turn.

Third, we need to praise God with a loud voice. We read next in verse 15 that the Samaritan was "praising God with a loud voice."

Sometimes, silent thanks is not enough, because deep thanks often involves an enthusiasm and emotion that silent prayers might struggle to express.

But on top of that, a loud voice is also needed for telling others what God has done for us. Sometimes we need to turn to the people around us and simply say: "Look what Jesus has done for us." "Can you believe Jesus gave us this? – we don't deserve it at all!" To our ears, speaking in such a stark way about God's blessings may feel childish – but don't be embarrassed. Because Jesus himself said "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." [Matthew 18:3] Often, we are called on to thank God like a child would thank his father. Because we are, in fact, God's children.

Finally, we should offer our very selves to Jesus in thanks.

That was one meaning of the Samaritan's falling on his face before Jesus. To do that was to acknowledge Jesus as his Lord – to offer himself to his service. And in the same way, as we thank God, we too are to offer ourselves to him – in devotion and in service. We are to give God thanks not only with our lips but also with our lives.

See the blessings. Turn from what you're doing, towards the Lord. Praise him with a loud voice. Offer yourself to him in devotion.

That is how the Samaritan gave thanks to Jesus for the blessings he'd received.

And we would be wise to imitate him.

Though several things may tempt us away from giving God proper thanks, expressing gratitude to the Lord brings us closer to him, and so we should be intentional about responding rightly to God's blessings.

Conclusion

Gratitude is our proper creaturely counterpart to God's grace.

He gives us so much. It's only right that we give our thanks to him.

But as we've already seen, in a way that is so characteristic of our God, even then – even when we seek to give him our thanks ... we end up receiving far more than we give. Because even as we offer him our thanks, he blesses us with more of himself.

Brothers and sisters, there is no cost to giving thanks to God. Only blessings.

And so, as you reflect on it now, as you go from here this afternoon, be intentional about opening your eyes and seeing what God has done for you. Turn from your ordinary tasks to give him thanks. Praise him to others with a loud voice. But most of all, fall at his feet in worship and thanks, so that you too might know him more deeply, both now and into eternity.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Green, Joel. *The Gospel of Luke*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.

Greene-McCreight, Kathryn. *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015.

Morris, Leon. *Luke*. Second Edition. TNTC. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.