

November 20/21, 2021

## Giving Thanks

Luke 17:11-19

Pastor Matt Meyer

Well, good morning. You know, a few weeks ago, Bryan talked about the idea of being faithful in the ordinary days of life. We were in this section in Acts together that covered three years of Paul's life during his third missionary journey. And one of the things that he pointed out that day was that we know almost no details about that three-year span of life. Paul's days were probably that he got up, he made tents for a while, he met with the church, he may have gone and preached in a synagogue, he disciplined believers, he went home, ate dinner, then went to bed. Then he got up, and did it all over again, because most days are like that. The majority of Paul's days were like that. And one of the things that Bryan said during that message—and he said it multiple times—stuck with me. He said, “If we can't be faithful in the ordinary days, if we can't learn to be faithful in the ordinary days of life, then we won't be faithful at all.” And I've been thinking about that statement for a couple of weeks. I've been pondering this idea of: What does it mean? How do we become faithful in the ordinary days of life? Is it something God just does in my life? Or is there something that I need to do to be a part of it? Or maybe it's a little bit of both? Because faithfulness is listed in the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, that would tell us that God has to be a part of it in some way, because it's the fruit of the Spirit, which means the Holy Spirit is involved. But I don't think that means *we* don't participate in some way.

As I've read the Scriptures, and looked throughout over and over again, Jesus and Paul and the other writers tell us things that we are to do as followers of Jesus. Jesus tells His followers over and over again, “Serve one another; love one another.” Multiple times throughout His life, He was trying to get that message into their heads. Paul tells us in Ephesians to, “*Take off the old self and put on the new self.*” He tells us in Romans to, “*Consider yourself dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*” He also tells us to, “*Offer our bodies as living sacrifices.*” In Colossians, we're told, “*To set our minds on things above, to set our hearts on things above.*” These are all things that we do.

Sometimes we think about growing in Christ—at least I do—that it's just this kind of automatic thing. I trusted Christ to be my Savior, and He'll change me as I go. But I think what we see throughout the Scriptures is that we don't become faithful just because we've trusted Jesus. Becoming faithful requires our ongoing participation.

So I'm back to the question, then, “What practices can I engage in; what things can I do to help myself become a more faithful follower of Jesus in the ordinary days of life?” And there are a number of things that we could think about together this morning, a number of practices or spiritual disciplines, things such as prayer, studying our Bibles, serving with one another, gathering together as we are today, singing and worshipping, gathering in Life Groups, as many people are doing, in community with one another.

But I want to talk about something that's much simpler this morning. I want us to think together about the idea of giving thanks. Seems appropriate, right? Because Thanksgiving is right around the corner. And celebrating Thanksgiving is going to be great. It's one of my favorite holidays. I love all the food, especially the stuffing. But giving thanks has to become much more than one day a year if it's going to affect our ordinary days, because for most of us, the day of Thanksgiving is not an ordinary day. And I'm still kind of in the process of learning this idea in my life. I'm actually indebted to my wife, Renee. She is the one who has taught me most of this. She lives this out on a regular basis, if not a daily basis, this idea of giving thanks, and she's encouraged me to move and grow into this discipline.

So, as I've dug into it, I've found that there are actually a number of studies recently—they've done a number of research studies on how gratitude affects our brains and thus affects our lives. Researchers have found that giving thanks actually rewires our brain chemistry, changes the nature of our brain, so that we think differently and, thus, we live differently. It's fascinating the things that they are finding out—I would say—what they're discovering is what God has known all along.

I looked it up this past week. There are more than 170 references to thanksgiving or giving thanks in the Old and New Testaments combined. God told the Israelites to regularly offer sacrifices of thanksgiving to Him. It was a normal part of their everyday lives, of their worship of Him. Have you ever wondered why God would set that up that way? I've pondered that. I think the answer to that is in Romans chapter 1. This isn't our main text for today, so you can turn there if you want to, or, if you want to wait, I'll read to you what it says in Romans chapter 1, verses 20 and 21:

*For since the creation of the world His (meaning God's) invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

So, this passage is telling us who God is, what He is like, His nature, His invisible attributes, His eternal power. His divine nature is evident to us; it can be clearly seen in the created world around us. And when people did not honor God, or give thanks, they began to move toward futile speculations. They began to move toward darkness in their hearts. They began to move away from the light of Yahweh, what He had given to them. The passage goes on to state that *they exchanged the glory of God for the image of a mortal human being*, basically saying they moved to idolatry. So I think God set up the Israelites' worship to include thanksgiving because it helped them to honor God, and to stay close to Him.

Think about the times in the Old Testament when Israel was in the wilderness. Many times, what was their attitude? They were ungrateful. They were not thankful for God's provision. They were grumbling—they were wanting to go back to Egypt. And then if you move later in their history, as we saw in our study of Judges last summer, over and over and over again, the people move away from God. They forget what God has done for them through any of the judges who deliver them. They move away towards living on their own, towards being their own gods, towards deciding what's right. They move away from God towards idolatry. So giving thanks helps protect

us from moving away from God. When we don't give thanks, we move towards darkness in our lives, away from the light of Christ. We move towards living on our own.

So here's a question this morning: Could it be possible that the reverse of what I just said is actually true? That when we are in darkness—maybe it's a hard time in your life where you can't figure out what's going on, or there's a trial going on, as many of us have been in for the last couple of years, or maybe you're actually in a sinful time in your life, where you've made bad choices, and you're facing the consequences of those choices—if in that time, we would turn towards God, we would seek to honor Him as God, and begin to give thanks to Him for what we have, would that lead us back towards the light of Christ, towards Jesus? I think it does. In fact, we're going to look at a story this morning where that thing exactly happens. Luke, Chapter 17, if you want to follow along. This is a story that happens to Jesus while He's traveling. We're told right at the beginning He is on his way to Jerusalem. Luke chapter 17, verse 11:

**While He (meaning *Jesus*) was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. (So, He's kind of right on the border, and He entered a village). As He entered a village, ten leprous men stood at a distance and met Him; and they raised their voices saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When He saw them, He said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they were going, they were cleansed. Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving thanks to Him. And this man was a Samaritan. (\*NASB, Luke 17: 11-16)**

Let's stop for a moment right there. Let me recap for you. Jesus is traveling; He's on His way to Jerusalem. He's passing on the border between Samaria and Galilee, which tells us that there are multiple different kinds of people there. There are Samaritans there, and then there are Orthodox Jews—regular Jews—who would have lived in Galilee. And as He entered the village, ten men with leprosy meet him, but they stay at a distance, we're told, because leprosy would have been a term that described any number of different skin conditions. But the fact that those skin conditions could be contagious, meant that they needed to keep themselves separate until the condition cleared up, which might not ever happen. But these men, they meet Him. So even though they're staying at a distance—obeying the Old Testament command to not mix with others—they meet Him we're told, which means they didn't just ignore that He's passing. And I think that tells us something that maybe they've heard, something they know about Jesus that's gotten around, that He's approachable—because they approach Him. And many of the religious leaders that might have passed through that way, if they had passed at all, because it's near Samaria, they would not have been approached by these lepers. They cry out for compassion, for mercy. They want to be healed, and Jesus immediately shows them He is approachable. He does want to give them compassion, and He tells them, **“Go and show yourselves to the priests.”**

Now this is what the law commanded when somebody was healed. But most of the time you didn't go show yourself to the priest until after you had been healed. So Jesus' command implies that healing will occur and, if they believe what He says, they'll obey. So all ten of them set off to go find a priest. And on the way, they look down at their hands; they see their arms and legs; they look at each other's faces, and they realize, “We're healed!” And one of them turns back, and it

says that he **glorifies God with a loud voice**. He falls down at Jesus' feet, thanking Him profusely. And we're told that **this man was a Samaritan**.

Now this miracle contains a double level of cultural tension that we wouldn't have really understood. The people, in their time who had seen this, maybe observed it, maybe heard it later, maybe read it later when the gospels were written, and then they were passed around, they would have understood, "Boy, there's something going on here." Because first of all, this guy is a leper, who we've already talked about how that separates him from society. They're outcasts. But he's also a Samaritan. The Samaritans were considered half-breeds. They had intermarried with foreign nations. So Orthodox Jews considered them half-breeds; they were foreigners to them. So the idea that a Samaritan leper could receive God's blessing and help was outside of the possibility in most people's minds, because they had written off anyone who was in either of those camps—and this guy was in both. Verse 17:

**Then Jesus answered and said,** (He doesn't speak to the man; He responds to the people around there.) **"Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?"** (Vs. 17-18)

So right there, even Jesus is portraying the way that these people viewed a Samaritan, a **foreigner**. Jesus is doing several things right here simultaneously. First, He's commending this man's actions of giving thanks. Secondly, He's showing that it's possible for someone outside the community of Israel, outside the nation of Israel, to respond to Him. And in a way, this Samaritan, this foreigner, is showing up the nation because he's giving praise and a loud voice to God, when the Jews, whose very name, by the way, reminds them to praise, because the word Judah means praise in Hebrew, and he's showing them up. And then thirdly, He gives us a lesson on thankfulness and giving thanks, because in this story ten people meet Jesus. Ten people cry out to Him. Ten people are healed. And I have no doubt that as they're going and they see that they don't have leprosy anymore, that all of them are thankful, because leprosy was a terrible disease. It made them outcasts. And I don't think that they looked down and thought, "Hey, no more leprosy! We can touch people; we can reenter society, no big deal." I think they all felt thankful. But only one of them turned to say, "Thank you."

Thankfulness and giving thanks, are two different things. It's not only the nine who are showing up in this story. The dynamic in this story plays out every day for every person on earth, because each day, every one of us wakes up to the sun rising, giving us warmth. We wake up to life and breath and beauty all around us. Life can be hard, and it's been especially hard the last several years. But it's still good to be alive. And so much of the goodness is available to every one of us, rich or poor, good or bad, young or old. Jesus reminds us in Matthew chapter 5 that *God causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good. He causes His rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous*. Every one of us experiences God's goodness in some way. We all have at least one thing, if not multiple things, to feel thankful for. But only some of us give thanks.

Why is this so important? Go back to what I said at the beginning: because it helps keep us close to our heavenly Father. It keeps us from moving away from Him towards living life on our own. It protects us from idolatry. Idolatry is a bit harder to recognize in our culture, right? because we don't have a big statue that people are kneeling down in front of. Not in our country, anyway. We don't have temples where we go and we offer sacrifices on a regular basis, so it's a little bit harder

to see. When we don't stop to give thanks, we begin to take God's gifts for granted. And that can show itself in our lives in multiple ways.

I'm going to talk about two this morning. The first one is this: When we begin to take God's gift for granted, we begin to assess our lives in terms of what we are owed. We begin to think that we have a certain right to a standard of living. "I deserve to live in a certain kind of house with a certain kind of car. I don't think I should have to drive a car that's older than three years old." Now, did you drive a relatively new car today? That's between you and Jesus. I'm not saying anything about that. But perhaps the question you ought to be asking yourself is, "Are you giving thanks to God for it?" The point is that most of us in this world, think we have an absolute right to health and happiness and every possible creature comfort. And when we think that we're owed certain things in life, that's a form of living on our own, of being our own god, of deciding that we know what's best. We know what's needed, and if we don't get it, we get angry and bitter and grumble.

Isn't that what the people of Israel were doing in the wilderness? Go back to that idea again. They don't have meat to eat, so they grumble. God gives them quail and manna every day. Well, "We don't have enough water to drink," so they grumble. God provides them water. And both times in those situations, they decide they think it's best that we go back to Egypt. They think they're owed certain things in life.

The other way that we take God's gifts for granted is: we begin to think that we have earned everything that we have. We think we made our success happen. "I worked hard." "I made the right investments." "I earned the degree." "I came up with the plan." "I executed it." "I started the company." "I did all of this." And we forget that whatever it is that we've done, whatever success we've had, it's been with the brains that God has given us, the bodies that we live in that God has given us. We forget that, and for most of us, the opportunities that have been given to us by other people are the foundation that we stand on and what we've done.

See these things creep into our minds. They're subtle, and a lot of times it's because of the culture of our world, which tells us through advertising and in all kinds of other ways, what the good life looks like—that this is what you deserve. This is what success looks like, what the proper rewards of success are. At this point in your life, you should be right here; you should be doing this; you should be receiving these things; this is what you deserve. But, if we stop and we give thanks, it begins to fight against those things. We don't know that's what's happening, but that's what's going on, because it begins to reconnect us and reestablish our relationship with God on the proper terms that everything that we have, comes from Him. It can cause us to be more aware of God's activity in our lives. Giving thanks begins to cleanse the subtle attitudes of self-sufficiency, that, "I did this," and the self-entitlement that, "I deserve this," and the greed that sneaks into our hearts. When the blessings of life are seen as a result of God's grace, it makes us into gentler, more humble, more faithful, more generous people. And it can help us stay faithful as we live our ordinary days.

And it does one more thing as well. It draws us close to Jesus and allows us to enter more fully into the salvation life that He offers to us. Look at how the story ends—the last verse—verse 19. Remember where we're at. Jesus has healed them all. Only one returned. He's fallen at His feet. Jesus has addressed the people; now He addresses the man.

**And He said to him, “Stand up and go; your faith has made you well.”** (Vs. 19)

So a couple of unique things about this verse. The words, **“Stand up,”** or **“Get up,”** may be in your Bible, they're an interesting phrase in Greek. It's a phrase that Jesus used. He just uses the phrase, I think, to say, **“Stand up,”** because this guy is at His feet. But later, when the early church read this, they would have associated that phrase with resurrection. It's as if Jesus is saying, similar to the prodigal son who once was dead, but now is alive, which is really true for this particular leper, because he was dead to society—couldn't go to the temple, couldn't go to synagogue; he was an outcast. But now, he can do all those things. He's got life again. And when you connect that idea to how Jesus ends the statement, where He says, **“Your faith has made you well,”** the literal translation of that is, *“Your faith has saved you.”* It's the word *sozo* in Greek; it's translated multiple ways. It can be translated *made well*, the way it is in our text. It can be translated *restored, delivered, saved*. It's the word used for salvation. So, there's so much going on in this little interaction, more than just the healing of the man.

I want you to listen to what a couple of commentators have to say about this last interaction with Jesus and the Samaritan leper. Darrell Bock, who is a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, says this:

*Jesus is saying that although ten have experienced the blessing of healing, only one has faith and has turned to establish ties with Jesus that indicate the presence of salvation. The deliverance Jesus affirms here is greater than the healing the man has experienced because they all experienced healing. This man had learned everything the miracle could teach him. Faith and salvation, again, merge.<sup>i</sup>*

He's saying when this man gave thanks, it connected him to Jesus and drew him into the salvation life that Jesus offers.

Now listen to what N.T. Wright has to say, because it's very similar. He says,

*New life, the life which Israel was longing for as part of the age to come, had arrived in this man's village on that day and it had called out of him a faith he didn't know he had. Once again, he says, faith and healing go hand in hand.<sup>ii</sup>*

Because this has actually happened multiple times in Luke's gospel, he likes to write about this. Luke chapter 5, verse 20, when the paralytic is lowered through the roof in front of Him, and Jesus forgives his sin, then He heals him, and all of it's on the basis of his friends, the faith of his friends.

Then again in Luke chapter 8, verse 48, when the bleeding woman comes and she touches the fringe of His cloak, and she gets healed of her bleeding, He stops her and what does He say? Almost the same thing He says, **“Daughter go; your faith has made you well.”**

Then two verses later, when He finally gets to Jairus' house, because He's on His way there when the bleeding woman interrupts Him. But Jairus' daughter has died, but He says to them before He goes in, **“Do not be afraid; believe and she'll be made well.”** Faith and healing go hand in hand.

N.T. Wright goes on and talks about this faith. He says,

*Faith does not just mean any old belief. It's not just any generally religious attitude to life. It's the belief that the God of life and death is at work in and through Jesus. And the trust that this is not just a vague general truth about the universe, but then it will remain good in this case for this man here and now.*

The man's willingness to give thanks, called faith out of him and brought him to Jesus. And he got far more than just healing. He entered into a salvation life, a life that's available here and now, not just a ticket to heaven, as Bryan and so many of us have been saying. It's available here and now.

Here's how Ann Voskamp says it in her book *One Thousand Gifts*, which is all about counting your blessings and giving thanks. She's talking about this particular story of the ten lepers, and the one who turns back. She says,

*Giving thanks, is what prepares the way for salvation's whole restoration. Our salvation in Christ is real, yet the completeness of that salvation is not fully realized or understood or experienced in a life until the life realizes the need to give thanks.<sup>iii</sup>*

She's not saying we don't have our complete salvation. She's saying we don't get it; we don't experience it; we don't understand it. Until we give thanks, we don't experience the abundant life. Let me say it for you one more time: I will never fully experience the abundant life that Jesus offers here and now, until I begin to express my thanks here and now.

God says it this way in Psalm 50, verse 23. This is Him speaking at the end of the psalm. He begins to respond and says, *"He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; And to him who orders his way aright, I shall show the salvation of God."* He's saying if you will come and offer thanksgiving and honor Me, and begin to set your way towards Me, I'm going to show you salvation, and the abundant life. Giving thanks helps connect us to God and allows us to enter into the abundant life here and now, that Jesus offers us and has given us in our salvation.

Let me show you how this works in a simple way. Giving thanks is often most people's first connection to God, before they even realize it. In most families, it's the first spiritual practice that we teach to our kids. Now we don't say, "I'm going to teach you a spiritual practice." We just pray at dinner time or at bedtime. And for the most part, a child's prayer always begins with, "Thank you God for.... And when each of our kids—our three boys—when it was their turn to pray at the dinner table, each of them did this. They started with, "Thank you, God, for this food." Then there was a pause. And then you realized, they're opening their eyes, and they're kind of looking around and they say, "Thank you, God, for mommy. Thank you for daddy. And thank you for Lukey. And thank you for Tobin and thank you for Micah and thank you for Dudley, the dog. Thank you for this table, for the flowers on this table. Thank you for my room. And thank you for my stuffed animals. And thank you for, and thank you for....." Some of you are laughing and smiling because you know what I'm talking about. And we laugh at that a little bit, except that I think that prayer is precious in the ears of our heavenly Father, because He knows that giving thanks for the same things multiple days in a row is a gateway that leads us to Him.

Giving thanks encourages us to be more aware of God's activity and His provision. It encourages us to trust Him for the future, rather than worry about the future. It begins to cleanse the subtle attitudes of self-sufficiency and entitlement and greed that sneak into our hearts, and it protects us from being drawn away from the God who has saved us, who loves us, who provides for us. Giving thanks allows me to enter more fully into my salvation, in my current life and circumstances. And as a result, it begins to transform me into a gentler, humbler, more generous, more faithful follower of Jesus. It helps us to stay faithful in the ordinary days of life.

So what do we do with this? How do we apply it? What does it look like to practice it in our everyday lives? This is so simple. You don't need me to explain this to you but humor me for just a moment. When you sit down to eat, whether it's with your spouse, your roommates, your friends, you thank God for the food, but don't just stop there. Do what these kids do. Stop for a moment, and maybe you don't open your eyes, but maybe you think about the things that you have in your life, and you thank God for them. You do it on a regular basis. Or maybe you practice it with your kids at bedtime. This is where I do it most of the time, because I pray almost every night with each of my kids before they go to bed. And usually as I'm praying, I will pray and thank God for something we got to experience that day, or for something they got to experience that maybe was without me. Or I just thank God for the fact that we have a roof over our heads; we have a soft bed to sleep in; we have warm covers on a cold night. And every time I do it, I'm reminded again of what's been given to me.

Or lastly, practice this on your own. Every day, write down five things you're thankful for. And then don't stop by just writing the list. Stop and express your thanks to God. In fact, I would challenge you to do this every time you sit down to spend time with God for the next month. Don't evaluate. Don't think, "Is this working?" Just do it for a month. And then at the end of that month, look back. Think about your outlook, your attitudes. Journal on this question, "How has giving thanks regularly affected my daily thoughts, attitudes, and actions?" I'm going to say that question for you one more time. "How has giving thanks regularly affected my daily thoughts, attitudes, and actions?" Because I think it will change you. I think it'll make us more faithful.

In fact, we're going to practice it and start today, right now. Take out a piece of paper; you have five minutes. If you don't have paper, open a notepad on your phone. Write down five things you're thankful for. It could be salvation, could be something God has done in your life recently. It could be material possessions, could be your family, could be your friends, could be your health, could be your job. It doesn't matter what it is. After you've written those things, take a few moments and just privately, quietly, express your thanks to God. You can write that as a prayer, a short prayer. You can just pray quietly. Rich is going to play while we do this. And then, we're going to stand up and together with a loud voice, like the Samaritan leper, we're going to give glory to God for what He's done for us.

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<sup>i</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary, New Testament Series* (Zondervan Academics, 1996).

<sup>ii</sup> N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>iii</sup> Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts* (Zondervan Publishers, 2011).