

Giving Thanks 11-19-17

Luke 17

I was talking with a brother recently who shared with me how hard a time he has had of late with his search for a job. Looking for work is hard. And one of the hardest parts of it is the rejection you have to endure while you wait for the right fit. When I was searching for a position of ministry in 2008 I came up with a new way to fight off discouragement when I got a rejection notice. Maybe this will work for you. I would head down to the grocery store and buy some apples or something. Then I pay for my food with my credit card. Now, this is so therapeutic for me because when you swipe the card, after a few seconds the little machine gives you a message, and what does it say? “Approved.” Glory Hallelujah! It said I am approved. And personally, I have been approved at Giant Eagle 37 times in a row. Who cares what a potential employer has to say, the machine at the store and the gospel of Jesus Christ both agree, that Dan is approved. And for the same reason. A deposit has been made in my account that is sufficient for all my needs. How cool is that? Well, our time in the word today, is going to be spent considering some folks who experienced rejection like you and I could hardly imagine. Today we will read from the gospel of Luke 17:**11-19**

While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; 13 and they raised 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 were going, they were cleansed. 15 Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, 16 and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine--where are they? 18 Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" 19 And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well."

I have a simple question to ask you about this story of the lepers. What was the difference between the nine and the one? Quiz time: true or false: the difference was that one was grateful for his healing and the other nine were not. The correct answer is --- false. Stay tuned for the rest of the sermon and learn why. We have here ten lepers who had an awful lot in common. Most notably it was the awful lot of being a leper. Beyond that however we can identify at least four things from our story that these lepers had in common. Oh yes, the one was different in a very important way but before we get to that you need to consider the similarities of the ten. What do we have here in this story? Verse 12 tells us that we have Jesus entering a certain village where he was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance. That is what lepers did. It was illegal for them to come close to healthy people. This disease of leprosy is one of the most awful known to man and it became among the

Hebrews a picture of what sin does to a man. These lepers would have grown hideously ugly over time. They were regarded as cursed by God and were social outcast. They were estranged even from their own families so they wandered about in groups hoping for food and looking for handouts. Whether they had searched for Jesus or had simply stumbled upon Him we do not know but it is obvious that some of them at least recognized Him as the miracle worker from Nazareth and so **13** *They raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"* The first thing then we have in this text is ten asking lepers. *Ten asking lepers!* No, they didn't make it into the Christmas song, but they were askers. And according to the New Testament that is a good thing to be. We are invited and encouraged to seek mercy from our Lord, to ask for His help. And the most pitiable people in the world really aren't the lepers who cry out for help but it is those who sense no personal need for the Lord. They have no desire for Jesus to do anything for them because they don't see themselves as having a need. They are starving and don't know it. They are blind but think they see. They are headed to hell but feel that all is well. If men would but realize that regardless of the condition of their bodies or the condition of their bank account that they are in the eyes of God spiritual lepers, unclean, ugly and vile they would in a second cry out to God for mercy and cleansing. These lepers could not help but feel their need for mercy. When they saw Jesus they saw one from whom they had hope of receiving mercy. They saw most of all one whose mercy was not impotent like yours and mine but powerful to the healing of sick bodies and curing of sick souls. So they asked Him for mercy. Have you? Have you sought mercy from Jesus? Call upon Him in time of need. He says, "Ask and ye shall receive." Call upon Him for forgiveness of sins and deliverance from sin. Romans 10 says "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

So we have ten asking lepers. They all asked for mercy. Then too we have ten obedient lepers. **14** *When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed.* Now this is very interesting. Jesus doesn't lay hands on them. He doesn't say, "Be healed." He simply commands them to go show themselves to the priest. Why? In the Old Testament book of Leviticus God had given his people certain rules about the treatment of leprosy. One of those rules said that if a leper was cleansed or healed from the disease he could go to the priest who would confirm his healing and give him a certificate permitting him to enter again into normal society. The only reason the lepers would have to go to the priest is to get such a certificate. But, when told to go they were not yet healed. They must have thought this to be a very odd thing for Jesus to say, and no doubt some of them would have been indignant about it thinking, "What good is it to go to the priest you haven't done a thing for us." They might have felt silly and

naive to walk off toward the priest as a band of ten leprous men. But, they did go. For whatever reason, they did go, as Jesus said. Whether they had some hope of being healed on the way I cannot say, but this story testifies to their obedience and for that they all deserve some credit. I couldn't help but think here of the Old Testament story of Naaman and Elisha the prophet. Naaman was a general in the Syrian army who had contracted leprosy and had made a long journey to Israel to seek out Elisha and ask to be healed. Do you remember this story? It is very amusing. Very human. When this big-shot general from a powerful nation travels for many days to get to Elisha's door, the prophet doesn't even come out to see him. Instead he sends a message to Naaman that he should go wash in the Jordan River seven times. Listen to what it says in II Kings 5:**11-12** *But Naaman was furious and went away and said, 'Behold, I thought, 'He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.' 12 'Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?'* So he turned and went away in a rage. That, I think, is the typical human reaction to the way that God chooses to work. Naaman couldn't see how a bath in the Jordan was going to help. And of course it can't. By itself, going to the priest can't help you, going to church can't help you, reading your Bible can't solve your problems – if that is all you do. But beloved, it is as you obey that God Himself will bless. Fortunately for Naaman he had some cool headed servants **13-14** *Then his servants came near and spoke to him and said, 'My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'*"**14** *So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean.* Isn't that great? It is in the way of obedience that God blesses. Learn that lesson. I tell ya, people are all the time wondering, "Why isn't God blessing me? Why doesn't He answer my prayers?" "And all the time they are ignoring what He tells them to do! If you want God's blessings then do what the ten lepers did; ask for them and then do what God says to do. Don't wait for something to happen to you first. Don't wait to feel saved or feel religious. Don't wait until your life comes together. You obey Jesus now and you will find that in the way of obedience there is blessing.

Our story then tells us that all ten lepers were healed. Let's see now we have ten asking lepers, ten obedient lepers, and ten healed lepers. This must have been quite a scene. Here they are walking along, maybe debating whether they should actually go to the priests, wondering why Jesus said to go and one of them begins to notice that he feels different. The numbness is gone. He looks at a friend and notices his face is clean. Soon they are all looking and touching and moving and flexing.

Their shock becomes excitement and their excitement becomes joy. Some are shouting, some are crying, but all are healed by the powerful mercies of Jesus. And the leper pack disperses. Some go back home to wives and children, some continue on to see the priest and one goes back to Jesus, but the similarities are not over yet. There is yet one other thing that they all had in common.

We see that we have ten asking lepers, ten obedient lepers, ten healed lepers, and ten grateful lepers. Yes, I said **ten** grateful lepers. Think about it. Here were these ten men experiencing the pains of this dreaded disease for which there was no hope of recovery. Jesus heals them. I cannot believe that any of these ten did not feel grateful. Even the most hardened sinner would be grateful for what Jesus had done. No, feeling gratitude, being grateful is not what distinguished the one from the nine. What did? What made the one leper different was not what he felt but what he did. He went back and he gave thanks. He said, "Thank you" and he also glorified God with a loud voice. That is what made him different. We have ten grateful lepers but only one thanksgiving leper. You see, there are many of us, and at different times, who could be classified as those who feel grateful without actually giving thanks. If I were to accuse you of being ungrateful for your health or ungrateful for the love of God in Jesus or ungrateful that God has blessed you in myriads of ways you would deny it. And I understand why you would deny it. You feel grateful. You are like the nine lepers who no doubt felt very grateful as they ran home and hugged their kids but like them you just don't actually get around to praising God, thanking God, serving God like a truly grateful person would. If you are sincerely grateful you just don't express that gratitude. I understand what that is like. When I was a kid I used to rue the day my mother came to me reminding me that I needed to write 21 thank-you notes after Christmas. Ugh! I didn't like doing that. Why not, wasn't I grateful? Yes, I really was grateful but... I remember talking with people involved in our ministry and from time to time someone would indicate that they have not felt their contributions have been appreciated. I would hear that and think, "How can that be? I certainly have felt very grateful." And that's true. But did I tell them that? Uh-oh. Count me in with the nine.

Can I count you in too? I always find Thanksgiving an interesting national holiday. It is a time when so many people feel grateful. They'll look at a plump turkey and at a nice house and they'll think, "Boy I have it good" and they call that gratitude. They feel grateful. But few really give thanks to God. And quite frankly, the thanksfeeling isn't worth much. You would think it silly to have a holiday called "Thanksfeeling." But that is about all most people do is feel thankful. That's true in late November and all year round. Why is that? Why do people not thank God? Well there may be several reasons. Those who don't know God don't know who to thank. That's the problem

with being an atheist - who do you thank? A blogger wrote of how he and his wife were sitting on the beach admiring one of the most beautiful sunsets they had ever seen. At the height of the grand display a guy walked by and said to them, "When this is over you'll probably want to stand up and applaud the artist." The blogger writes, "We did." But how can you applaud an unknown artist? How can you thank an anonymous benefactor? But the unbeliever does feel grateful to something or somebody. Just listen to media people around thanksgiving. They'll make these sweeping statements about gratitude - but the thank-yous are never written because no one knows the correct address. Is it God? Which God? You know people hold these ecumenical Thanksgiving services to thank the deity whatever her name may be: Allah, Krishna, Jehovah or Elvis. When you don't know whom to thank it certainly becomes difficult. But in our story and with many of you that's not the problem. The nine lepers all knew, as well as the one, whom to thank. And you know who to thank but often we fail - why? I suggest two reasons. The first reason is that Thanksgiving takes effort. Thanksfeeling takes none. This leper had to go back to Jesus. His reunion with his family would have been 15 minutes later than the others. It's like on Thanksgiving Day when the food's all out and you're ready to grab it and growl but you know you are supposed to pray, but as you do the gang is thinking, "Hurry up, hurry up." Sure it's Thanksgiving but thirty seconds is enough. You see there are things we do that take effort but typically those things have some direct bearing upon our own well being. We don't see how it will help us to give thanks so we don't give it any time. Every year in the month of December the dead letter department of the post-office is deluged with letters addressed to Santa Claus which say what? "Dear Santa: Please give me this, that and the other." But after Christmas how many letters to Santa do you think they have to deal with? Almost nobody writes Santa back to say "thank you." The thinking is that giving thanks doesn't pay. It is not a cost-effective use of time. That is why we do so much more praying than praising in the church. That's true. A lot more people pray to God about their problems than praise him for their blessings. In fact the number in our story is nine-1; and that's about right. There are nine requesters for every one worshipper. Charles Spurgeon says (Spurgeon #32, p. 687):

Most of us pray more than we praise. You pray little enough, I fear; but praise, where is that? At our family altars we always pray, but seldom praise. In our closets we pray, but do we often praise? Prayer is not so heavenly an exercise as praise. Prayer is for time, but praise is for eternity. Praise therefore deserves the first and highest place.

Well how about you? Do you take the effort to thank God? Do you make that a regular part of your prayer life? Reviewing what God has done for you and lifting your voice to Him in thankfulness? We sing, "Count your blessings name them one by one." Do you? Have you ever as an individual or

a family made a list of thanks and then used it for prayer? Thanksgiving takes some effort. It takes time. It requires some thought. And because this takes effort God calls it a sacrifice. Hebrews 13:15 *Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.* Thanksfeeling takes no time, no effort and is worth little. Thanksgiving is a sacrifice and is considered precious in the eyes of God.

The second reason we often fail to give thanks is that it involves a risk. Now here I'm thinking specifically of public thanksgiving, and the risk of it involves what people will think. We are concerned about how we look. And so we play it cool. We don't get too excited, too emotional, and most don't even speak at all. What I like about this leper is how he gives thanks. He had no concern for how he looked, no zeal to protect his dignity. Look at this 15 *Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice.* He didn't care that he was the only one. He would have loved to have his friends come and join him in praise but the thankful heart is willing to sing a solo of gratitude. Besides coming solo he also came loud *glorifying God with a loud voice.* We Presbyterians don't believe in being loud. Your heart may be bursting but you don't sing loud because, "What will people think?" Look with me at Psalm 95 where the Psalmist says 95:1-2 *O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, Let us* What? (That's not how you say it) *Shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. 2 Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, Let us* (let me hear it) *shout joyfully to Him with psalms.* Shout is the command. Shouts are loud! They are not dignified, but they are Biblical. Decide which you want to be. Look further at the leper. 16 *He fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him.* What we see in his thanksgiving is something I long to see more of in our religion and that is intensity. He was loud and expressive. He was under the grip of this thing. He came with intensity and he came with humility. The man fell on his face at the feet of Jesus. He seemed to be saying, "I am nobody, Lord, you are everything." Again it was sort of a messy scene. The sophisticated people there must have felt very ill at ease over this display. The ex-leper didn't care. He was not there to impress but to give thanks.

It was in this one thing that the lone leper stood out. We see that there were ten asking lepers, ten obedient lepers, ten healed lepers, ten grateful lepers, but only one thanksgiving leper. And the point of the story is that this one difference is very important. It is important people that you thank God for what He has done for you because it is right so to do. I read of a farmer who had business in the city and while he was there he stopped off at a restaurant for lunch. He found a seat next to a group of teenage boys and proceeded to bow his head and pray over his meal. The boys decided to have some fun with the farmer and one of them said, "Hey, farmer, does everyone do that where you

come from?" The farmer said, "No son, the pigs don't." Sad to say but too many of us find ourselves with the pigs at that point. It is really incredible how ungrateful humans can be. Fyodor Dostoevsky saw this and he offered this definition of man, "Man is a creature that walks on two legs and is ungrateful." Someone else seeing the same things said that if you want to find gratitude look for it in the dictionary. You won't find it in the world. But let me tell you one place you had better find it, and that is in the people of God. We are to be marked by gratitude and if we are not it betrays us as phonies. Listen to this exhortation from Colossians 2:**6-7** *Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, 7 having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.* That is what we are to be like. David said, Psalm 103:**1-2** *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits.* So many of us I think just don't know what God is looking for from us. We think that God wants us to be workers when first He wants us to be worshippers. We think He is concerned that we be witnesses and that is true but first I'm convinced He wants us to be worshippers, to speak with him before we go out to speak with men.

So what then shall we do? What should you do? The answer is to give thanks. Make it a new pattern of life as you pray every day make sure you set aside time to thank God for what He is doing for you, for what He has done for you. Don't just feel thankful. Express it to Him. Tell others about it in your small group and as you gather for worship. Did you hear the one about the guy who had a dog that played poker? His friends were amazed and impressed but the dog's owner dismissed it. He said, "Yeah, he can play, but he's not very good. Whenever he gets a good hand he wags his tail." Has God dealt you, Christian, a good hand? Then, certainly today, thank the Lord. What do you have to be grateful for today? Surely there is something. A Sunday School teacher once asked her young class what they were thankful for and one little boy said he was thankful for his glasses. She said, "Oh really, you're thankful because they help you to see?" He said, "No mam, because they keep the boys from hitting me and the girls from kissing me." Can you find something to be thankful for today? Maybe some of you are thinking of particular individuals whose efforts you appreciate so much but you just haven't told them so. Maybe it is a friend, or a teacher or a parent. How many of us have adequately expressed gratitude to our parents? What is God speaking to your heart about today?

If there is nothing else, this evening, in this church there will be set forth before you the body and blood of our Lord Jesus. The body was broken and given to you. The blood was poured out on

your behalf. And if you recognize yourself to be what you are, apart from Christ, a rejected and cursed spiritual leper then, well, let the redeemed of the Lord say so. The grace of Jesus is worthy of far more than mere gratitude, it demands thanksgiving, humble, loud, and often.

Let's pray. *Father, forgive us for being slow to express our thanks, forgive us the pride that keeps us concerned about appearance, forgive us the fear that quiets our voices, forgive us our indifference to amazing grace. Open our eyes this hour to see our spiritual leprosy and to comprehend what has been done for us by Christ Jesus. Lord, thanking You is certainly right and so we do say "Thank-You, Bless You" Savior, Shepherd, Healer, and King. But we know there are many agents of your mercy to whom similar blessing is due. Direct our hearts today toward fit objects of our thanks. And tomorrow, Lord, give us an overflowing gratitude that speaks to all about the good hand we have been dealt as children of the King....* And all God's people said, "Amen."