

What Do You Say?

Luke 17:11-19

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 30, 2025 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, 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 made clean.

¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:11-19, NRSV)

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Jesus comes into town one day and is met by the most undesirable welcoming committee. Nobody in those days wanted to be approached by a leper – much less ten lepers! These men who were afflicted with a serious skin disease which in those days equated to a virtual death sentence. In fact, Jewish tradition held that curing leprosy was as difficult and as unlikely as raising the dead. You might actually be better off dead than ending up as a leper. The disease was considered highly contagious, making the leper physically untouchable. On top of that, leprosy was believed to be contracted as a consequence for sin. Lepers weren’t just victims to be pitied, they were sinners to be scorned.

By Jewish law lepers were shunned from all communal life. They were forced to maintain at least a 50-pace distance from all non-lepers, constantly shouting

“unclean” as a warning when they went into public so as not to contaminate others physically or spiritually. Their condition excluded them from all family life, from worshipping in the temple or synagogue, from going to the marketplace, from essentially everywhere except the isolated leper colonies where they could suffer together. The only place a person might encounter lepers was on busy thoroughfares where they often would beg for scraps to feed themselves as they waited to deteriorate and die.¹

That’s what these men are doing when they come towards Jesus, though instead of begging for food they are begging for mercy. The fact that they call Jesus “Master” gives us a hint that they approached with some level of reverent expectation. Likely Jesus’ reputation had preceded him. Maybe word of his miraculous healings had even reached their isolated colony. And in this they are not so unlike us. If you have ever gone to God and asked him to do the impossible for you or for somebody you love, you have probably gone with God’s reputation as a miracle worker in mind, and with at least some hint of anticipation that he might do something similar for you. It certainly can’t hurt to ask.

In this case, it isn’t long before these men get their answer. Jesus sees them, hears their request, and immediately tells them, “**Go and show yourselves to the priests.**”² In those days it was priests, not doctors, who were charged with diagnosing leprosy. And in the rare case when somebody might experience healing, it was only a priest who could confirm that healing had in fact occurred, and that the stigma was removed.³ Luke tells us that these men, all ten of them, must have had at least enough faith in Jesus to do what he told them to do. Why else would a leper go back to the priest unless it was to have him confirm your anticipated healing? Their obedience pays off. After only a few steps, all ten men are healed.

It would be hard to overestimate the shock, the wonder, the joy that these men must have experienced in that moment. So much in their lives considered dead and gone had been instantly brought back to life. I love this painting by American artist, James Christensen. I’m

¹ Mike Nappa, “What was it like to live with leprosy in Jesus’ time”, Nappaland Inc.. Read post at <https://nappaland.com/articles-bible-smart/what-was-it-like-to-live-with-leprosy-in-jesus-time/>

² This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ This was a part of Mosaic Law. See Leviticus 14:2-32. Jesus never once broke Mosaic Law.

struck by how he imagines this scene. Let it inspire your imagination. Imagine each man in that moment of healing examining his own hands, staring at his neighbor's face, all while running forward to find the priest and freedom. Have you ever had such a moment in your life? One moment everything seems lost, but then, against all odds, and after all those years of seemingly unanswered prayers, in a single moment everything lost is restored? Just try and imagine what these men must have been feeling in that moment.

Whatever it was, one of them is feeling something different. One of these men is not like the others, something the painting also captures well. Luke describes what happens in the next moment. I wish James Christensen had painted this scene as well. **“One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet [the first non-leper he had touched in years!] and thanked him.”** Then Luke adds one more detail. **“And he was a Samaritan.”** Just so you know, the only thing worse than being a leper in ancient Israel was being a Samaritan leper. You were twice cursed, because the hatred Jews had for Samaritans, whom they considered spiritual half-breeds, was centuries old and ran deep. Consider the hatred between some Muslims and Jews in the Middle East today and you get some sense of how these two groups felt about one another.

So why this one? What is it about this man that leads him to turn back when the others rush ahead? Luke seems to infer that at least some of the other lepers were Jews, Jews who had likely been tutored their whole lives to give thanks to God. And yet it is just this one, this Samaritan, this most unlikely one, who alone turns back to give thanks. Maybe all we can say is that sometimes gratitude shows up in the most surprising places. I remember sharing a cup of coffee in the humble grass hut of an elderly, mostly-blind Ethiopian woman who owned less in this world than most Americans throw away in a month, and being stunned by the level of gratitude which permeated her spirit. I have met people living on the streets in my own city who seem to be far more grateful than other people I have met who live in mansions. I have met people locked up in prison, sometimes for years, who display gratitude in ways that leave me humbled. Don't misunderstand me, not all people in such circumstances are grateful. You can be poor and bitter at the same time. Still, what I have learned along the way is that gratitude is not necessarily a product of circumstance.

So what about you? Whatever your circumstances, are you a grateful person? Would those who know you

best describe you that way? If you were in the group of ten that day, would you be the one to turn back around to thank Jesus? Perhaps the more important question is, would you like to be that sort of person? Understand, you can be a person of faith and still not be grateful. You see that, right? That's evidenced right here in this story. All ten had faith, demonstrated in their obedience to Jesus' command. But only one was faithful *and* grateful. Don't you want to be faithful *and* grateful?

Our problem is that gratitude is not the default position of our hearts. Entitlement is. I think of that key passage in Romans 1 where Paul outlines the nature of human sin. He says that God should be so obvious to us, his power, his divine nature, his goodness, his worthiness to be worshipped above all else. And yet, Paul writes, **“For though they [i.e. us] knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened.”**⁴ That's entitlement, a blindness to the fact that the good you possess is a gift you did not earn or deserve. Worse, it's the prideful illusion that you are self-sufficient. Writer Tim Keller points out that this is why plagiarism is such an offense. When you plagiarize you are taking credit for coming up with somebody else's idea. It's the refusal to acknowledge dependence on another and give thanks to another, which is a form of theft.⁵ (Please note that I'm giving Tim Keller credit for this idea!)

Don't you have an aversion to somebody you perceive to have a sense of entitlement? Isn't there something in you that wants to see such a person knocked off his or her imaginary pedestal? And yet, can't you see that this is also the default position of your heart? Mine too. Literally every good thing you have in life, life itself, is a gift you did not earn or deserve. You did not create yourself. You cannot sustain yourself. Specifically, you cannot guarantee that your heart beats even one more beat, or that tomorrow morning you will wake up to see another day. If God removed his gracious presence from your life you would cease to exist. And yet, when things don't go your way do you act as one who is eternally grateful? Or do you tend to act as one who is getting the short end of the stick? If you have ever wondered why people can be so richly blessed in life and yet seem so ungrateful, this is the reason. The more entitled you feel, the less grateful you will feel. The two cannot coexist.

Considering that entitlement is the default position of the human heart, it's a wonder that even one in ten turned back to thank Jesus that day.

⁴ Romans 1:21

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Prayer* (Penguin Books, 2014), 196.

But I don't want to live like that? I don't want to live with the illusion of entitlement. Do you? I want to have a life marked by gratitude, regardless of the circumstances. Don't you?

Some would say that what we need is a regular dose of perspective. In his book, *Soul Keeping*, writer John Ortberg has a brilliant little chapter on gratitude. He (rightly, I think) points out that gratitude is always a by-product of perspective, specifically perspective that involves three factors. He uses the old Latin word *bene*, which means "good," to explain. To become a grateful person, he says, you need to see the benefit, the benefactor, and the beneficiary.⁶

First, to be grateful you have to recognize that what you possess is a benefit to you. A few weeks ago I injured my back. The pain was intense. I actually found it hard to breath. Honestly, in those moments I was not feeling grateful, certainly not for the injury. The pain, the injury, did not feel like a benefit. For one, the immobility caused me to cancel some important commitments I really wanted to keep. Once again it was clear, the default position of my heart was not gratitude. I felt entitled to my health. And yet, as I lay immobilized for that next day the Lord did some work on my heart. I'm not saying God caused the injury and I'm not saying that he didn't cause the injury, but he did use it to help me evaluate the current busyness and pace of my life which itself may have been the cause of the injury. In that sense, I could almost begin to see the injury as a benefit, which meant I could almost come close to being grateful, not for the pain itself, but for what the Lord was teaching me in the pain.

If you never come to see what you possess is a benefit to you, you will never be grateful. And yet, isn't it true that everything the Lord gives us is going to be used by him for our benefit. Psalm 103:2-5 implores us,

**Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

This points to the second thing that gratitude requires, which is a benefactor. Just because you possess things which you consider benefits, if you imagine that you are the one who deserves credit for bringing these things

into your life then you will remain ungrateful. It makes me wonder how atheists spend Thanksgiving. The person who denies the existence of God can certainly see benefits in his life, but who does he thank for those benefits. Famed atheist, Richard Dawkins, offers his fellow atheists "7 Tips" for navigating Thanksgiving dinner. They include not bowing your head during the blessing. What do you have to fear, he points out, if somebody notices you not praying it's because they aren't praying either and perhaps you will have just connected with a fellow atheist!⁷

In all seriousness, if you don't recognize a benefactor in your life, it will be impossible to be grateful. If the good things in your life are just random accidents, or the result of your own efforts or merit, why would you be grateful? You won't. You'll just feel entitled.

When you come across the word "thanksgiving" in the New Testament it's the Greek word *eucharisteó*.⁸ That's the word Luke uses here in verse 16 when he says that the one leper turned back and "thanked" Jesus. At the root of that word is the Greek word *charis*, which means "grace."⁹ That's not by accident. At the heart of gratitude is always grace, and grace, by definition, indicates that you have received something you did not deserve. It also points to the benefactor who gave you that gift nonetheless.¹⁰

James 1:17 declares, **"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."** The Lord is our great benefactor. The word benefactor literally means "good factory". I love that. God is a factory of good, manufacturing good benefits one after the other! And we are, of course, the beneficiaries of all those good benefits. Once we realize that we are the beneficiaries who have been given good benefits from a good benefactor, we will become grateful people. Jesus asks aloud in the passage, **"Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"** Could it be that these nine others were not naturally grateful because they lacked perspective, that even in that incredible moment they could not see themselves as fortunate beneficiaries of good benefits from a good Benefactor?

This right perspective, however, though it is a good start is also not enough. It is where we must begin, and so I encourage you to consider carefully these "three goods" in your own life. But even if you are in agreement that you are the beneficiary of great benefits from a generous Benefactor, your heart (mine, too!) will still be naturally inclined towards entitlement. That's

⁶ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Zondervan, 2014), 170-172.

⁷ Herb Silverman, "7 Tips for Atheists at Thanksgiving Dinner," *Richard Dawkins Foundation*, November 19, 2014. Read online at <https://richarddawkins.net/2014/11/7-tips-for-atheists-at-thanksgiving-dinner/>

⁸ <https://biblehub.com/greek/2168.htm>

⁹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/5485.htm>

¹⁰ For what it's worth, the word for joy is *chara*, which also comes from the same root. Thanksgiving, grace, and joy are all connected.

why gratitude is something we have to not only understand, but practice. When I was a kid my parents made me practice gratitude all the time. I mentioned last week how I had to always write a thank you note for gifts I received. Doing so would not have been my natural inclination. In fact, never once did I receive a gift and instinctively rush off on my own initiative to write such a note. I had to be trained to do so. And when somebody did something kind for me or offered me a kind compliment, my parents would always prompt me by asking me, “What do you say?” They had to repeatedly ask the question because left to myself I probably wouldn’t say anything. I’d just receive the gift and go on my way. And so they made me say, “Thank you”, even when “Thank you” was not what I was feeling.

To cite Tim Keller again, “It’s one thing to be grateful. It’s another to give thanks. Gratitude is what you feel. Thanksgiving is what you do.” Think about that. This is what our parents were trying to teach us. You are not naturally feeling grateful. You may not even necessarily be able to make yourself feel grateful. But you can say “Thank you.” And the more you practice saying “Thank you,” reminding yourself you are the beneficiary of good benefits from a good Benefactor, the more you will begin to cultivate a heart in which gratitude becomes spontaneous and continuous. The Hebrew term for “gratitude” is *hakarat hatov*, and literally means “recognizing the good.” I love that. And it reminds us that sometimes recognizing the good takes intentionality. We tell ourselves, over and over again, “What do you say?” And what we say, over and over again, is, “Thank you.”

Of course, a great way to do this is in prayer, which also takes intentionality. When we are in need, we naturally pray for help. When we sin, we may naturally pray for forgiveness. But when we enjoy good gifts, we don’t always naturally pray thanksgiving. But this can be remedied by simply making a habit of creating space in our daily prayers to stop and thank our Benefactor for the benefits he has showered on us. This of course includes thanking God for the most precious gifts he has given us, ultimately for Christ, for his incarnation, his sacrifice on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension to heaven, the family of God he has created and included us in, the forgiveness we have through him, and the hope of his coming again to make all things right. Yes, our gratitude must always begin with Christ and the eternal treasures he has made available to us by grace.

But then it’s good that we go further in our thanksgiving beyond these essentials. Author Martin Thornton points out, for example, that too often we don’t think “widely enough” in our thanksgiving.¹¹ In his words, “What is really remarkable about this world is the extraordinary amount of real tragedy that fails to happen; and of course the vast amount that does happen but not to us – which links thanksgiving with intercession on a wide scale.” Part of the problem is the fixation of our media to feed us all the bad news all the time, to the point where many of us feel as if the whole world around us is falling apart. Yes, there is great pain in our world, and places of devastating tragedy. But Thornton’s point is that maybe we should also stop to consider all the terrible things that could have happened to us that have not. In fact, some day we may be stunned when the Lord has us look back and shows us all that he protected us from.

Thornton also points out that our times of thanksgiving to God don’t always need to be so high-minded. In his words, “We thank God for the sunshine and flowers, but not for beer and dance music.” In other words, why not beer and dance music as well? His point is that we can become almost prudish and puritanical in our gratitude, suffering from the delusion that there is something slightly irreligious about giving thanks for what might be considered to be “worldly” pleasures. Let’s not do that. Let’s learn to give God thanks for *all* his gifts.

For example, some of us have just spent the week reading through Song of Songs, an entire book of the Bible dedicated to celebrating romantic love. So when was the last time you stopped to thank God for sex? Why not? It’s his idea. It’s his good gift! Why can’t we thank God for the aroma of a cup of freshly ground and brewing coffee in the morning, or a perfectly turned double play in baseball, or the smile of a grandson delighting over a silly face, or the music and lyrics of Bruce Springsteen, or the taste of a carnitas burrito from your favorite taco truck? That’s the start of my list, of course, and your list is likely different, but why not take time regularly to give thanks to God for these sorts of good gifts as well. G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “I cannot subscribe to the view that God made all the enjoyable things especially for the benefit of the wicked.”¹² Every earthly pleasure is a gift from God.¹³ When we enjoy them in the ways that he intends them to be enjoyed, it not only give us pleasure but him as well. There’s an old Estonian proverb that says, “The one who does not thank for little will not thank for

¹¹ Martin Thornton, *Christian Proficiency* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1988), 103-106.

¹² Cited by Thornton, 104.

¹³ C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, made this point through the voice of a demon: “All the same, pleasure is His [God’s] invention, not ours. He

made the pleasure: all our research so far has not enables us to produce one.”

much.”¹⁴ Why should we not then thank God for such pleasures, simple as they may be? It’s good that we do.

Today we begin the season of Advent, this time of preparation and waiting for Jesus before Christmas. And while Advent isn’t typically thought of as a time of thanksgiving, the two are also not incompatible. Some years ago during the season of Lent, that time of preparation before Easter, a friend in the church wrote me what he called a “Lenten thank you.” He wanted me to know that the Lord used something I had preached to inspire him to make that Lent a season of gratitude. He wrote, “Instead of saying ‘no’ to something this Lent season, I’m saying ‘Yes’ to expressing my gratitude.” His intention was to take time each day to recognizing the good, the benefits and the Benefactor which had blessed him, a grateful beneficiary.

Is it your desire to be the uncommon one who naturally turns back to Jesus with gratitude when so many around you rush off to enjoy good gifts with no thought to the good giver of those gifts? If so, I encourage you to ask Christ to inspire you with some way you can practice gratitude during this season. Nearly everything around you in this world will work against this, and so if we are not intentional it will not happen. We will only learn to be grateful if we practice thanksgiving.

So what habit can you institute in your life this Advent to practice thanksgiving as a way of cultivating gratitude? Maybe it’s as simple as carving out time every morning in prayer to thank God for his good gifts, even the ones as simple as the cup of fresh coffee you are enjoying in the moment. Or maybe it’s taking time at the end of each day to look back over the day and thank God for some of the blessings you experienced along the way. You’ll never be able to remember them all, but take 5 minutes to name as many as you can. What about buying a stack of “Thank You” notes and writing one a day to somebody in your life for whom you are grateful, including in the note how much you thank God for the blessing they have been in your life? Or maybe it’s pausing before each meal, a few more moments than you might ordinarily pause, and giving thanks. If you do, be specific. If you’re having pasta and you love pasta, tell God, “Thank you, Lord, for this fettuccini alfredo. I am truly grateful!” And those of you with kids at home, make sure you include your kids in some way. Remember, this doesn’t come naturally to any of us, and so the earlier we can start practicing the better.

The great American playwright, Thornton Wilder, once wrote, “We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.”¹⁵ That one former leper was not only conscious of the treasure he came to possess that day, but conscious of the one from whom he had received it. Lord, help us learn to be similarly grateful, for we too are the fortunate beneficiaries of so many benefits from so great and generous a Benefactor.

Amen.

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The Next Step ***A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application***

1. Read the story again from Luke 17:11-19. What do you notice in this story?
2. How is it possible that nine of these men could receive such a remarkable gift from Jesus and fail to even pause and give thanks?
3. Why do you think Jesus seems so put off by the fact that only one of these men turned back to thank him? Do you think Jesus needs our gratitude?
4. Why does gratitude sometimes show up in surprising places? For instance, why do you think it is that sometimes the very poor in our world are more grateful than the very rich?
5. From what you know of yourself, had you been one of these 10 lepers do you think you would have been the one who turned back to thank Jesus? Why or why not?
6. Consider this quote from Catholic priest and writer, Henri Nouwen: “Gratitude...goes beyond the ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.” How do you respond? Is gratitude something that needs to be practiced to become natural and continuous?
7. Make a list of five ordinary pleasures in life for which you may never have thanked God? As an

¹⁴ Cited by Henri Nouwen, “The Choice of Gratitude,” *Henri Nouwen Society*, July 2, 2024. Read online at <https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/the-choice-of-gratitude/>

¹⁵ Cited by Ortberg, 176.

example, Jeff's list included fresh-brewed coffee, a double play in baseball, the smile of a grandson, the music of Bruce Springsteen, and a carnitas burrito. Now make your list.

8. What is one way you want to practice thanksgiving this Advent season as a way to cultivate gratitude in your heart? Be as specific as you can.

Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.



Make a list as a family of 20 things for which you are grateful. Talk together about how you might set aside a regular time to keep adding to this list.