

Gratitude

Pastor Tim Melton

In Luke 17:11-19 we find the story of 10 lepers:

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem he 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."

With which of these lepers can you best relate? Most of us can relate to both. At times we are thankful and at other times it does not even come to mind. We can only speculate about the reasons that the other 9 lepers did not return to thank Jesus, but we find in this one Samaritan the humility and recognition of a gift received of which he had not earned and to which he had no right. These traits are essential if one is to have a thankful heart.

We are called to be thankful, but this is not our natural response. A lack of gratitude was first seen in the garden of Eden, back in Genesis 3. God had given Adam and Eve everything, and yet they were not grateful and instead chose to disobey and eat the forbidden fruit. This lack of gratitude continues until today.

In Romans 1:19-21 the Apostle Paul talks of the world's lack of thankfulness:

"What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without

excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

God showed Himself to the world through His creation, but the unbeliever does not honor God or give Him thanks. A lack of gratitude is an attribute of those who are without God.

Now some would argue that they know unbelievers who are very gracious, thankful people, but what is the truth of this situation? A non-believer can be grateful, to an extent, as he or she seeks to focus on the benefit and good things that one has received, but the heart will still be disconnected from **the True Gift Giver**. James 1:17 tells us that **“Every good and perfect gift is from above.”** For anything good in our lives our thanks should be first and foremost to God. In scripture thanksgiving is likened to a sacrifice of praise (Ps. 50:23), an act of worship. While a non-believer may be able to be thankful in the horizontal plane, he or she misses the purpose and the good of gratitude when the thankfulness is misdirected or given to a mere mortal.

Imagine that you are in desperate need for money to pay the rent, or money to buy your books for university, or medicine to treat your terminal illness, and the doorbell rings. You answer the door and there stands a simple delivery man. He holds the package out to you and asks for your signature on his little digital pad. You open the envelope or package while the delivery man is still standing there, and to your amazement inside you find the money for rent, the money for your books, or the medicine that you need to survive. With it you find a short loving note from the sender of the package expressing his love for you during this time of need.

Now imagine in that moment of gratitude you begin to thank the delivery man for everything that he has done for you. For everything that he means to you. For the special place that he now holds in your heart. For the love that you have for him . . . That does not quite seem right. Why? Because you would be giving your greatest thanks to another instead of the actual gift-giver. Yes, it is good to say thank you to the delivery man, and you might even give him an extra tip, but your biggest “thanks” would be reserved for the giver of the gift.

We must remember that **“Every good and perfect gift is from above** (James 1:14-17).” It is okay to give thanks to one another, but we would do well to follow the pattern of the Apostle Paul, who is often seen thanking God for others and what they had done for Him. In Romans 1:8, Paul says, **“I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all.”** In Philippians 4 Paul gives thanks to God for what the Philippians had done to help him. In Colossians 1 Paul says, **“We always thank God (...) when we pray for you.”**

Those who believe in Christ are rightly related with God to give Thanksgiving to Him, but even we, as followers of Christ, often seem to struggle in the area of gratitude.

The difference between a thankful heart and an unthankful heart can be traced back to how we view the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is a matter of the heart. We can see it more clearly in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 4:15 Paul wrote these words: **“All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”** The Gospel

of Jesus Christ was spreading, and more and more people were finding salvation in Jesus Christ. The natural result was an outpouring of gratitude that gave glory to God for what He had done for them through Christ.

Thanksgiving is connected to grace. At salvation we come face to face with the full extent of our sinfulness (Romans 3:23). Christ took upon Himself the guilt of the sinfulness of mankind. He then paid for our sin by enduring the just wrath of God. Because of the price that Christ paid on our behalf we have been spared and have now been made right with God. We have been saved and can take no credit for it. The only thing that we truly deserve is condemnation and death, but instead we have been given salvation.

As children of God we should live in this position of spiritual humility and indebtedness for God's grace for the rest of our lives. It should result in a mindset that realizes that we don't deserve anything. We don't deserve the breath we just breathed, much less anything else that we receive in this life. Because of this, everything in life is an added bonus and a blessing. It births a heart of thanksgiving.

As we walk daily with Christ, we will be drawn into the perfection of God and reminded more of the imperfections of self. It is like Simon Peter's reaction in the presence of Christ and Isaiah's response when he saw God.

In the presence of Jesus, in Luke 5:8, Simon Peter proclaimed, *"Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"*

In the presence of God, in Isaiah 6:5, Isaiah said, *"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."*

As we remain near Christ we are taken time and again to the truths of the cross. We will be reminded of our spiritual bankruptcy, but be provided for through the riches of Christ. From this undeserving position we will be thankful for everything. The extent of our gratitude will be in direct relationship to the understanding of the desperation of our need and the totally undeserved deliverance that has been found in Christ.

If one does not know Christ, or if a believer has drawn away from Christ, the opposite will occur. Spiritual humility, which comes from remembering one's sinfulness and God's grace, will be replaced by a sense of self-righteousness or entitlement: "I deserve better!" The focus goes from what God has done to what man can do. It will go from pleasing God to pleasing self. From humility to pride. We will think more about the present than eternity. We will be desensitized to our sin and begin to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. But how can we? In 1 Corinthians 4:7 we read, *"What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"*

The thankfulness of a believer's heart is directly connected to his or her intimacy with Christ. As we walk near to Christ, our sinful past and God's gracious present come together to keep us in a humble and grateful frame of mind.

Now, it is one thing to understand this truth when explained, it is another thing to actually be thankful in the midst of every day life. Ephesians 5:20 says, *“Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Does the writer of these verses really mean always and everything? Does he live in the real world? Yes. His name was Paul.

In his younger years Paul had put his confidence in who he was and what he had accomplished (Philippians 3). After Paul became a follower of Jesus Christ everything changed. He now recognized His sin. He now had experienced the endless grace of God and He found contentment. He then wrote these words, *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things”* (Philippians 3:7-8).

Now, knowing that he deserved nothing, through Christ he now found contentment in every circumstance (Philippians 4:11). Paul is not one who talked of contentment while living an easy life. He was very familiar with suffering. He had been in prison, exposed to death multiple times, shipwrecked, beaten, whipped, stoned, in danger from thieves, in danger from rivers, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, had even gone without sleep, gone without food (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Paul knew suffering, but he still had found something so blessed that he still could pen these words: *“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Many will ask: how is this type of thankfulness possible? He knew that *“all things work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His Purpose.”* That in Christ, Paul had already received more than he could ever ask or imagine, and if God never blessed him again, he was still blessed beyond compare. That was the key to his gratitude.

When we forget the gospel we are likely to lose our sense of continuous gratitude. We no longer live under the overarching source of greatest thankfulness. We instead will turn our attention to the immediate difficulties and forget the ongoing, eternal, umbrella of blessing under which we live.

We start to turn to the world to meet needs that have already been met in Christ. We begin to question the wisdom and the goodness of our God. We cease to acknowledge all that we have already been given and we begin to long for the superficial things of this world that do not matter. It is like a teenager forgetting about their parents’ ongoing goodness and provision, and becoming angry with them because they will not buy them the latest phone or video game.

We are already children of our heavenly Father and have everything that we will ever need, but yet we still listen to the voice of discontentment as if God’s provision is not sufficient and the world’s gifts are greater than God’s. Where is our contentment? Where is our gratitude? Where is our submission that should be fueled by the grace of God that has already done more than we could ever ask or imagine?

Gratitude focuses on the needs that God has faithfully met in our lives. It pushes back against the forgetfulness of His blessings and the beckoning of the world to fleshly desires.

The gifts of God are an expression of God's love for us, and our gratitude is a way for us to receive and respond to God's love, much like a Father and child are drawn nearer to one another as they enjoy a gift given and a gift received.

The overarching blessing of God found in the Gospel provides our ongoing sense of thankfulness that reigns over and outshines even the most difficult of days.

Some tend towards thankfulness, because they can remember when life was much worse or when they had much less. Others are oblivious to the need for thankfulness, because they have always had much and see it nothing more than the expected way of life. They don't recognize the blessing that they are living in the midst of. We must battle against these thieves of thankfulness. As Christians we cannot allow our hearts to be led away by the belief that "we deserve it!", "we earned it!", or that God's blessings are not good enough.

We must foster gratitude in our own lives and the lives of our children. In the beginning it is a discipline or a duty that grows into a habitual way of life and condition of the heart. Pray for a heart of gratitude. Teach the gospel to your children. Preach the gospel to yourself. Teach your children to give thanks to God in prayer. Discipline yourself to give thanks. Become aware of the needs of the less fortunate. Remind yourself of what God has done and share your "God stories" with others. As seen in Psalm 145:4, ***"One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts."*** May we remember the blessings of God and be thankful.

As we close, let us fix our hearts on thankfulness as we read once again what the Lord has done for us:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

(Psalm 23)

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Read Romans 1:18-21 and summarize these verses in your own words.
- 2) Can a non-believer have a heart of gratitude?
- 3) In 2 Corinthians 4:15, the Apostle Paul writes that thankfulness is the natural result of the gospel working in one's life. How does the gospel bring about thankfulness in one's heart?

- 4) Why is an ongoing, intimate relationship with Christ necessary for one to continue with a heart of gratitude?
- 5) Paul tells how we are to be *“thankful always and for everything”* (Ephesians 5:20). Is this realistic? Based on this lesson, how would we say this is possible?
- 6) When you think about your life, when is it most difficult for you to be thankful?
- 7) Knowing that a heart of gratitude comes from our nearness to Christ in the gospel, what can we do to nurture a heart of gratitude?
- 8) What do you think God wants you to remember from this lesson?
- 9) How do you think God wants you to apply it to your life?
- 10) How can we pray for you about this?