

**Learning to be Grateful  
Luke 17:11-19**

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

*Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."<sup>1</sup>*

*"But as for these others who showed no gratitude for the mercy shown to them, they shall be cursed. Their leprosy shall return and even those in Sheol shall pity them. From the breaking of day to the end of time there shall be no end to their suffering."*

That is the way the story goes—at least if I could have written it, if my my mother, those fine ladies who raised me could have added their two cents in!!

*How dare you not say thank you! What do you mean that you have not written the thank you note to your aunt! Say thank you for the macaroni and cheese and lima bean casserole! Do you know how many children in China would be grateful to have that tonight?*

(No, can you name 5?)

Say thank you!

Growing us that was just beaten into me! Manners!

It seems that manners are becoming a casualty in many places in the world. Not in Canada where you can stand forever waiting to see who will go through a door first, but in other places! Did you see the reaction after Biana Andreescu won the US Open and apologized, apologized!<sup>2</sup> to the crowd for beating Serena Williams? As one commentator put it, it was the most Canadian thing ever! But that thing seems to be passing away. Little things like "Yes sir and No Ma'am" are becoming as anachronistic as a carriage ride. Nice, but in our fast paced world something we can just let slide. After all, what is the big deal?

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 17:11-19. The following paragraph is an apocryphal addition by the preacher.

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/tenniscanada/status/1170462057092792321?lang=en>

Apparently it wasn't a big deal in Jesus day either! Jesus was traveling in that border region between Samaria and Galilee. Everyone knew that you needed to steer clear of that area. No telling who you might run into.

And that is exactly what happened to Jesus. He ran into the worst of the worst. Or should we say, they ran to him.

Lepers.

They had committed a sin so heinous that that God had cursed them with a horrible disease. They bore the cost of their sin on their skin, there for the whole world to see. They were outcasts—throw away people, forced to live away from everyone and everything. We don't want their sin to rub off on us! Keep them away! Avoid at all costs!

One summer I had the opportunity to work at a juvenile detention center in North Carolina. My partner and I were there to provide worship services, bible studies—in short to be pastors to the residents/inmates. Our incarcerated youth group were there for crimes ranging from skipping too many days of school to prostitution at 14, from stealing a bus to killing his father after he beat his little sister. It was an eye-opening experience, to say the least.

But what was most astonishing to me was the reaction we received from the surrounding churches when we invited them to come and help us with activities. It was an overwhelming "NO!" And you can understand why. *"We don't want our kids contaminated by them."*

That is how we treat lepers—no matter what their sin, their illness.

And just like my residents, given half a chance these lepers ran. They ran to Jesus! *"Jesus, have mercy on us!"*

And he did! So Jesus! He sent them to the priest, to do the things that Torah required them to do to be cleansed—the things that if they had done them in the first place they wouldn't be out in the nether-region!

And they go! And as they are going—they don't even get there, they realize that they have been healed. Their skin is like that of a baby's! But not only have they been healed physically, they are healed socially—they can go back to the market;

They have been healed relationally—they can once again hold their wives, their children;

They have been healed economically—they no longer have to beg for the kindness of strangers.

Can you imagine the joy, the exhilaration?

There is jumping and screaming and hugging and running.

But one...just one goes back to say thank you for the one who made this possible?

Where were the other nine?

Why didn't they go back to say thank you?

Maybe they never learned to be thankful.

Too often we think that just because when we went out trick-or-treating, when someone gave us a candy bar, and our parent stood behind us reminding us at every door —“What do you say?” just because that was our experience that was everyone’s experience! We think everybody knows how to be grateful!

But that isn’t the case! Babies are cute and wonderful, but they aren’t grateful! Thankfulness doesn’t come naturally to us, and sometimes it doesn’t come at all. It is something we have to learn.

It begins with humility, the recognition that we aren’t self-sufficient, that we didn’t create ourselves, that everything, everything we have is a gift.

Often, when left to our own devices we are too much like that great theologian Bart Simpson, who once when he was asked to offer thanks at a family meal, said, “*Dear God, we bought all of this stuff with our own money, so thanks for nothing.*”<sup>3</sup>

That sorta sums up the feeling in our age, doesn’t it? We earned this! We bought this! We deserve this! Why should I be grateful?

Well, to be a bit self serving, we need to be grateful to be healthy. *Psychology Today* shares 7 scientifically proven benefits to being grateful.<sup>4</sup>

1. Gratitude opens the door to more relationships.
2. Gratitude improves physical health. According to a 2012 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences* grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and report feeling healthier than other people.
3. Gratitude improves psychological health. Research confirms that gratitude effectively increases happiness and reduces depression.
4. Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression. If we are grateful we are kinder and are less likely to respond in anger.
5. Grateful people sleep better.
6. Gratitude improves self esteem.
7. Gratitude increases mental strength. It is show to be helpful in overcoming trauma.

Maybe this leper had been taught to be grateful. Perhaps that is the thing that kept him going through those months of isolation; the memory of his mother reminding him to say thank you; the grace said before meals, the reminder that every morning is gift. Maybe that is what brought him back to Jesus. He just had to say thank you because....well that is who he was!

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Martin B. Copenhaver. “Learning to Give Thanks,” *Christian Century*. October 30, 2015. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-10/learning-give-thanks>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201504/7-scientifically-proven-benefits-gratitude>

And isn't that the kind of person we want to be? Really? Don't we want to be the kind of person that says, "Thank you."

But we don't! Oh, so often we fail to say thank you. It isn't that we don't want to, that we aren't thankful, it's just that we have just come to think the way things are is how it always is. We just come to expect it.

Even at church. Just this week I had a conversation with someone and I realized how much work they do, and how too often we have just failed to say thank you.

To Ralph who makes sure the doors are open every day and rings the bell to let us know it is time for church.

To the choir who puts in a lot of time in practice and dedication.

To the people who every Sunday after worship count the offering, to those who volunteer to teach our children, to those who serve on committees that keep this place alive and thriving.

To the Loyal Workers who will fix soup this Wednesday like they have for so long.

Here at church we need to say thank you more often, not only to express our gratitude, but to model it for others! Just like we do when we say grace before our meal in order to model it for our children.

But can we do more? Can we be grateful all the time?<sup>5</sup> John Kralik has written an intriguing book called *365 Thank You*. He decided to write a thank you note every day for a year. This decision didn't come in a time when he was feeling particularly grateful. In fact, he was feeling anything but! He was middle aged and overweight. His law firm was losing money, in fact they lost their lease. His marriage was failing. He was sleeping on the floor in a run down apartment. Hardly the kind of life where "Thank You's" spring forth!

Then one day he got lost on a mountain hike. He had no idea where he was or how to get home. He wandered around for what seemed an eternity, and by the time he got back to civilization he had come up with a plan to write a thank you every day for a year. But he wondered, "Do I have anything to be grateful for?"

But he started. He wrote notes to people close to him, to his family and friends. He wrote notes to neighbors. Then it got harder. "One day," he writes, "I just couldn't think of anybody to thank." He stopped at his regular Starbucks, where the barista greeted him by name—"John, your usual venti?"—and with a big smile. Kralik reflected, "*I thought, this is really kind of a great gift in this day and age of impersonal relationships, that someone had cared enough to learn my name and what I drank in the morning.*" So he wrote the barista a thank-you note. And so it went through the year. Each day a thank-you note, each day a day of thanksgiving. Kralik says that the experience of expressing thanks day in and day out changed the way he experienced life.

What would it be like if we just lived life with gratitude?

What if we looked every day for something for which we are grateful?

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/10/pentecost-21-c-gratitude-and-grace/>

It won't be easy! I know it sounds like it is, but in our world we have become so accustomed to seeing life like we deserve what we get, that gratitude will take some work. There may be circumstances that make gratitude harder for some than others. We need to confess that at times it is hard to see the gifts around us. But all of us need to improve. We will have to learn to stretch those muscles a bit. It is going to take some intention, some work.

We might start by taking a clue from Kralik. Maybe not write a note, but at least take some time every day to make a gratitude list. Write down the things for which you are grateful every day—food, a smile, the gift of time, a great meal, someone allowing you to move into traffic, life itself.

But perhaps we can share that idea with others. David Lose, former president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, has suggested that when someone asks, "How are you?" (something that happens all the time, a question that we always just respond without thinking by saying, "Fine") what if we responded by saying, "Grateful!"

"How are you?"

"Grateful."

Try it? Turn to the person next to you and ask, How are you? Try responding "Grateful."

This week I had a call from Savannah our daughter who asked me, "*How are you?*" I said, "*Grateful!*" "*For what?*" she asked? It opened a whole line of conversation!

Might that happen for you? Might the other person start thinking about what they are thankful for?

As he walked through that in-between region, Jesus healed 10 lepers. One, in a spirit of gratitude came back to say thank you. Jesus sent him away with the words, "*Go on your way. Your faith has made you well.*"

If we can learn to live in gratitude might we hear those words too? "*Get up and go on your way. Your faith, your gratitude has made you well!*"

Thanks be to God.

Amen