

## How Can I Thank You?

Text: Luke 17:11-19

How do you get under the skin of the most gracious and powerful man who ever lived? Jesus never sinned. So he wasn't peevish or characterized by an ill temper. But in the passage I'll read in a few moments, you can tell from his remarks that his expectations exceeded the response he got. Before looking at the nine verses that tell the story, let me first provide you with some background on what's about to happen.

I suppose today one of the words people most dread hearing is cancer. Though progress has been made in its treatment, the term is still frightening.

In Biblical times the big scare word was leprosy. It was a double whammy because the disease not only disfigured you physically, it ostracized you socially. Regardless of your status, you no longer had the option of living with the general society. Instead, from now on you were literally an outcast.

In his book "The Cross and the Crown", Frank Slaughter writes: "Wherever he went the leper was required to announce his presence with the mournful cry of "Unclean! Unclean!", a signal for all to draw away lest they be contaminated by the dread scourge. Lepers could mingle only with their own kind and could not enter the Temple at Jerusalem or any walled city on pain of being lashed with not less than forty lashes. Since all religious authorities admitted to being utterly without power to cure the leper, what help he obtained could come only from God.

With a feel for the hopelessness of their situation, let's now look in as ten male lepers attempt to make contact with the Son of God.

This is Luke 17, verses 11-19: *"Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance <sup>13</sup>and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"*

*When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.*

*One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan.*

*Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."*

What happened here was more amazing than you catch with a single reading of the text.

Your odds this week of winning the state lottery are better than your chances back then of

being healed of leprosy. Two thousand years ago, an individual with leprosy was in an impossible situation. What could alter such despairing circumstances? Not a thing. Absolutely nothing.

It's not easy to live without hope, without the slightest possibility that tomorrow can be a better day, that events have a chance, however slight, of turning around. But that's the locked-in position in which these unclean companions found themselves.

At least one was a Samaritan. The ten lived together on the border between Samaria and the Jewish territory of Galilee. Though Jews and Samaritans didn't have any social interaction, when you had leprosy all such distinctions were forgotten. It was good just to have friends, someone to talk to, and others to help in the mad scramble of staying alive.

Now into the gloom of the forlorn existence of leper colonies came incredible reports of miracles being performed just like in earlier days. A maverick rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus was drawing great crowds. Some believed this attractive young man was the long awaited Jewish Messiah, the anointed one from God. In fact, part of his popular appeal was his healing of the sick; including (would you believe) isolated occasions when someone was actually cleansed of ... leprosy.

It must have been that the ears of these ten tingled when they first heard of such news. Now their lips could speak about nothing else. Contact with the Christ became an obsession. But how? Lepers couldn't attend one of his public meetings. Fortunately, Jesus traveled quite a bit. Maybe they could catch him between stops. If all of them called his name at the same time, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us." – possibly that would get his attention. They must have realized making such a request was a long shot and undoubtedly they knew that what they were asking for was nothing short of a miracle.

The actual interchange between the two parties was brief and took place at a distance. Once the "gang of ten" had his attention, Jesus responded by shouting back, "Go show yourselves to the priests." That's what a healed person was supposed to do according to the Old Testament law. So the encounter was over almost before it was begun.

What was wonderful is that somewhere along the way, as these guys headed to where the priests stayed, they came to realize their miracle had been granted. Their white spots

were gone. The clothes were still ragged and dirty, but their bodies were free of this cursed disease. Hey, it couldn't be, nevertheless it was so. They had been healed – all ten of them.

Can you picture in your imagination these adult males jumping for joy like little boys, slapping each other on the back, laughing raucously, checking each other's bodies for any places that might have been missed.

We can understand their excitement. What we can't understand is that only one of them returned to say "Thank you". Apparently, he didn't even go on to see the priest first. The

text reads, “When he saw he was healed, (he) came back, praising God in a loud voice. (Then) he threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.” His body language and his words are the epitome of gratitude and worship. This was genuine thanks being expressed, no question about it. “And he was a Samaritan,” one of those you have to figure was the least likely to respond as he did.

The surprised remark of our Lord was “Were not all ten healed?” I mean, only one out of ten is here? Where are the other nine? It’s incredible and mind boggling that they haven’t come running back too. Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? If what I did for them was a small thing, I could understand their neglect. But considering how huge a favor the other nine were also granted, the fact that they didn’t join their friend here in expressing thanks is a bit shocking.

If this were an isolated occurrence, we could all wag our heads and say “Unbelievable. How sad for Jesus. And how sad for these nameless other nine guys.” But my suspicion is that this scene is played out time and again, especially in America and even on the very day we call Thanksgiving.

The point of this passage is not all that hard to figure out. When Christ acts graciously on our behalf, he expects us to express a proper attitude of thanks.

Most of us in attendance today were born in the U.S.A. Though not flawless as a nation, the truth is that many in the world still see this as the great land of opportunity. They would trade citizenship with us in an instant. Compared to their living situations, Americans have it made.

Am I saying this is without question the best country in the whole world? Not at all. But it certainly knows more than its share of blessings. Whether deserved or not, God has “shed His grace” on America at least for now.

Recognizing how fortunate we are, have we as a people returned to Jesus, throwing ourselves at his feet, saying thank you and praising him in a loud voice?

My guess is that naturalized citizens are better at this than the native born, and earlier generations of Americans were probably more inclined toward this type of behavior than are those of this present day. “Wait a minute,” someone protests, “Haven’t we as a nation set aside a whole day specifically to say ‘thank you’ to God for His graciousness to us? Maybe you should preach a message like this sometime in February or March when thanks is not so much on everybody’s minds.”

The point I’m actually making is that this Thanksgiving week I’m not so sure all that many Americans will be truly thankful to God for His graciousness to them. Unfortunately, it’s relatively easy to spend this national holiday stuffing ourselves with food while basically forgetting about the Lord and all he’s done on our behalf. I mean, is a quick prayer before diving into the turkey and dressing the total spiritual involvement our forefathers had in mind?

Is watching football on television or spending a couple hours at the movies to be the main event of Thanksgiving?

It was less than a year after settling in this new land that the early colonists celebrated their first Thanksgiving. During the harsh first winter they had lost nearly half of their original party. But they were still thankful to God for this new start on life. Their tradition of a feast, marked by special seasons of prayer and the celebration of God's goodness, gradually spread from Massachusetts to many of the other New England colonies.

Thanksgiving and the Pilgrims seem to go together, just like Christmas and Santa Claus--but the truth is, the Pilgrims never held an autumnal Thanksgiving feast. Before you cancel the turkey, take a look at the origin of that particular myth. In some ways, the truth is even more intriguing. The Pilgrims did have a feast in 1621, after their first harvest, and it is this feast which people often refer to as "The First Thanksgiving". This feast was never repeated, though, so it can't be called the beginning of a tradition, nor was it termed by the colonists or "Pilgrims" a Thanksgiving Feast. In fact, to these devoutly religious people, a day of thanksgiving was a day of prayer and fasting, and would have been held any time that they felt an extra day of thanks was called for. Nevertheless, the 1621 feast has become a model that we think of for our own Thanksgiving celebration and we do know something of the truth about it.

We can assume, for example, that the harvest feast was eaten outside based on the fact that the Colonists didn't have a building large enough to accommodate all the people who came. Native People were definitely among the invited guests, and it's possible, even probable, that turkey (roasted but not stuffed) and pumpkin in some form, found their way to the table. And it gets better. This is the way the feast was described in a first-hand account presumably by a leader of the colony, Edward Winslow, as it appears in Mourt's Relation:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, Many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest King Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

From this we know that the feast went on for three days, included ninety "Indians", and food was plentiful. In addition, to the venison provided by the Indians, there was enough wild fowl to supply the village for a week. The fowl would have included ducks, geese, turkeys and even swans. Jump forward about a century and a half and we witness our first president, George Washington, issuing a general proclamation naming November 26,

1789 as a onetime day of national thanksgiving. Then it's another 75 years before Abraham Lincoln, during the sobering days of the Civil War, proclaims the last Thursday of November, 1863, as "a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father." This tradition held until 1939, when F.D.R., wanting to help business by lengthening the shopping period before Christmas, pushed up Thanksgiving Day to one week earlier. Finally, in 1941, Congress voted that it would always be the fourth Thursday of November that was our legal holiday.

Three things that keep us from being thankful

1) One is our pride. This is the attitude that says, "Nobody ever gave me anything, I worked hard for everything I have." For years you studied hard and now it is finally paying off. With this kind of attitude, we feel that we have no one to thank but ourselves.

2) Another attitude that keeps us from being thankful is a critical spirit or constant complaining. Instead of being grateful, this person will always find something to complain about.

"A lady known as an incurable grumbler constantly complained about everything. At last her preacher thought he had found something about which she would be happy, for her farm crop was the finest for miles around. When he met her, he said with a beaming smile, 'You must be very happy Mary. Everyone is saying how healthy your potatoes look this year.' 'True they're pretty good, but what am I going to do when I need bad ones to feed the pigs.'"

3) A third attitude that keeps us from being grateful is carelessness. Someone once said that if the stars only came out once a year, we would stay out all night to watch them. But they are there every night and we have grown accustomed to them.

The Israelites grumbled because they had no food so God miraculously sent manna (a crust-like bread) to cover the ground each day except the sabbath day. Then they started to grumble because it was the same thing every day.

They had a miracle - straight from God every day but were no longer satisfied. Because of pride, carelessness or a critical spirit we will never be truly thankful for all that God has given us.

Rudyard Kipling was a great writer and poet whose writings we have all enjoyed. Unlike many old writers, Kipling was one of the few who had opportunity to enjoy his success while he lived. He also made a great deal of money at his trade.

One time a newspaper reporter came up to him and said, "Mr. Kipling, I just read that somebody calculated that the money you make from your writings amounts to over a hundred dollars a word; Mr. Kipling raised his eyebrows and said, "Really, I

certainly wasn't aware of that."

The reporter cynically reached down into his pocket and pulled out a one hundred dollar bill and gave it to Kipling and said, "Here's a hundred dollar bill, Mr. Kipling. Now, you give me one of your hundred dollar words." Mr. Kipling looked at that hundred dollar bill for a moment, took it and folded it up and put it in his pocket and said, "Thanks."

He's right! The word thanks is certainly a hundred dollar word. In fact, I would say it is more like a million dollar word. It's one word that is too seldom heard and too rarely spoken and too often forgotten. If we would all adopt an attitude of thanksgiving into our lives - our lives would be changed. We would savor each day.

At this point, let me quickly inform everyone tracking with me that I have no intention of driving us down Guilt Street. Writing a simple thank you note for a gift or an act of kindness can sometimes be the hardest task in the world for some people. If that's the case, what method do you then use to let God know how grateful you are for all He's done on your behalf?

The Lord is aware that truly talented song writers are few and far between, and not too many people make their living writing poetry now-a-days. If Jesus were only bodily present in our world, who wouldn't run to him, fall at his feet and shower him with expressions of praise and thanks?

That would be easy. But it's awkward to attempt to duplicate that act when there's nobody there to physically cling to. My suspicion is that the problem is not so much a matter of purposeful neglect, as it is one of knowing how to go about doing what's appropriate, especially when we aren't sure about the proper protocol.

Yes, we know that expressing our thanks is important. Scripture declares that "to whom much is given, much is also required." So, we don't want to get under Jesus' skin by clumping ourselves with the nine lepers who were granted so much, but never even came back to say thank you. Yet, how we're supposed to go about expressing our thanks is the dilemma we're faced with.

How To:

Here's my suggestion. It will take more than a couple minutes, but not a huge number of them. You have probably already noticed in your bulletin the insert marked 1 to 50. Its heading reads: "If Jesus were here bodily, I would want to thank him for . . ."

Now listen, sometime today I want you to write down at least 25 items for which you would thank Jesus were he here in the flesh. Caution, this is not a get-it-done-as-fast-as-possible test. So you don't write down the names of all the different people in your extended family. Our beautiful grandchildren – that's okay as one item. What you're doing is making a list of specifics for which you would thank Jesus were He somewhere

in the area nearby. So they can't be stupid items like "my new socks" or the "tank of gasoline". However, you could include "thank you for more than enough clothes to wear" or "for a reliable car to get me places."

More illustrations. Thank you Jesus for...

- Good health
- Forgiveness of my sins
- A roof over my head
- For educational opportunities
- The privilege of prayer
- A steady income

Thank you Jesus for...

- My five senses
- A stable government
- Also the opportunity to vote my conscience
- The joy of giving to you work
- The Lord's Table
- A soul mate
- PEACE in our land

Again, thank you for...

- My church – not perfect but a good one
- The chance to travel
- Assurance about life after death
- Your patience with my spiritual progress
- Beautiful stars at night
- The place you have prepared for me in heaven
- Even for problems that help me grow spiritually

How Long:

I've quickly suggested over twenty already. Before this Sunday ends, you're to be half-way through your list of fifty. If Jesus were here in person, I would want to thank him for ... and sometime today you should have at least 25 items on your list.

I believe all of us can make it to fifty, but it won't be that easy. I chose that number because it takes a while to come up with that many. The last eight or ten are the hardest.

But you have Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday to complete the assignment. Doing so

ought to keep you in a thankful mood. If you're anything like me, your mind will stay alert to obvious items that you should include.

What if I gave you two minutes of my sermon time right now so you can get started? You ought to be able to write down between five and ten ideas anyway. If you didn't bring something to write with, at least get your brain working on the assignment, okay?

(two minutes of quiet)

You've had just two minutes to get started on your list. To get it up to 25 items of thanks, shouldn't take more than another focused ten minutes sometime later today.

Can you add another ten on Monday? Then eight more on Tuesday? And complete the last seven on Wednesday?

Response:

In the Anglican Eucharistic liturgy every Sunday the celebrant says, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." The people then respond, "It is right to give Him thanks and praise." Let's say that together. "It is right to give Him thanks and praise."

Now, every time I pause momentarily and motion with my hands, say it again.

*"It is right to give Him thanks and praise."*

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to You, Father Almighty.

*"It is right to give Him thanks and praise."*

I Thessalonians 5:18 "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

*"It is right to give Him thanks and praise."*

Psalm 107:1 "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good."

*"It is right to give Him thanks and praise."*

Especially give thanks to the Lord, this Thanksgiving week.

*"It is right to give Him thanks and praise."*

Let us be like the man with leprosy who was healed by our Lord, and returned quickly to say, "Thank You Jesus".



*“It is right to give Him thanks and praise.”*

Even if it means some extra minutes beyond this service, we will find them, because giving thanks to God is a proper thing to do.

*“It is right to give Him thanks and praise.”*

Psalm 100, verse 4, *“Enter His gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise, give thanks to Him and praise His name.”*

*“It is right to give Him thanks and praise.”*