

“Giving Him Thanks” (Luke 17:11–19)

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What is most lacking in this country of ours? What does our society need? If you ask ten different people, you will probably get ten different answers. Depending on who you ask, the answers might be love, tolerance, civility, diversity, equality, education, science, faith, peace, or security. I think some of those are good answers. Some of those answers are better than others. But this country would be better off immediately if we had something else: gratitude. We would be better off if more people were truly thankful.

Think about this: how often do we get messages about being thankful? It seems like all the messages that come at us are designed to make us feel anything but grateful. Think about the news stories we hear. They are often about bad things happening. The news makes us feel fearful or outraged. And this is by design. News is a business, and tragic stories sell. We seem to have a whole industry built on grievances, on who is more oppressed. This is true on both sides of the political aisle.

Think about the commercials that we see: they are designed to make us feel that something is lacking in our lives, and if we only had that product, things would be better. A lot of commercials show a common problem that could be solved with a great product. Think about how many detergent commercials you’ve seen where the kids are getting their clothes dirty. The mother is frustrated that the kids aren’t more careful and that she can’t get those grass stains out. I’m sure the father is frustrated that the family has to keep buying clothes. The kids probably don’t care, but they’re not going to buy the detergent, so who cares about them? But now, if you get this detergent, all those frustrations are gone. Grass stains wash out easily. The kids can play outside without care. Moms and dads can relax. Just about every infomercial and “As-Seen-on-TV” product has that formula: it identifies a problem and offers a solution.

A lot of commercials are far more subtle. They don’t identify a problem, but they get you to covet something you don’t have. They show a beautiful car navigating winding roads along the coast as well as crowded streets through concrete canyons. You may have a car that works perfectly well, but in watching those commercials, you’re led to believe that if you only had a new car, your life would be more adventurous and exciting. You may have a phone that works perfectly well, but you see commercials that show the latest technology, and you imagine that

your life would somehow be better if your phone's camera had more megapixels or more storage, or whatever. You have clothes that don't have holes in them, that look fine, but you see ads on the glossy pages of a magazine or a catalog that show people wearing stylish clothing, and you're led to think, in subtle ways, "My life would be better if I looked like that."

Notice that cable news doesn't make you feel more thankful. Commercials don't make you feel content. Talk radio doesn't make you feel more peaceful. Social media doesn't make you feel grateful for what you have; instead, it tends to make us feel envious or outraged. Imagine what the world would be like if we could turn these messages off and find reasons to be grateful.

Today, we're going to look at the importance of being thankful. We're going to consider a passage in the Gospel of Luke that shows how true faith in Jesus results in thanks. We'll also consider how one of the biggest problems of humanity is not being thankful. And we'll consider ways that we can thank God more for all the good things he's given to us.

Today, we're looking at Luke 17:11–19. I'm going to read the whole passage, explain what's going on in it, and then think about those issues.

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."¹

Luke has already made it clear that Jesus is bound to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). He doesn't mean that Jesus was going on a straight line from Galilee to Jerusalem, in Judea. He means that the time was approaching for Jesus to go to Jerusalem where he would be crucified. But he does some very important things before he gets there, and Luke saw fit to include this passage.

As Jesus was walking between two regions, Samaria and Galilee, he entered a village. There were ten people there who had a terrible skin condition. This is referred to as leprosy in

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

the Bible, though it's not exactly the equivalent of what is known as leprosy today. Leprosy could refer to any type of ongoing skin condition. What's important is that in the eyes of Jewish people, skin conditions made people "unclean."

To understand what's going on here, we have to know something about what the Bible says about diseases and being clean. And to understand this, we have to understand something about the nature of sin. Last week, I said that sin was not just a way to describe wrong things we do. It's a toxic, destructive power that causes to want to do wrong things. Sin is rebellion against God, a turning away from our Creator and turning to value the creation instead. We were made to know, love, and worship God but we have turned away from him. We don't seek a relationship with him—at least not a right relationship with him. We don't love him the way we ought to. We don't worship him all the time. We don't do what he wants us to do. In other words, we don't live according to his design. And because of that turning away from God, we have a broken world. When we turn away from the God who ordered and arranged the world, we find disorder and chaos. When we turn away from the God who is love, we find hate and war. When we turn away from the giver of life, we find death. Part of the penalty of sin is a world full of disease and ultimately death.

So, the ultimate reason there are diseases like leprosy in the world is because of sin. That doesn't mean there's a direct connection between a person's sin and an illness they have. It's not that all people who have diseases have done some particularly awful sin. Some very healthy people are great sinners, and some very godly people have a lot of ailments. So, there's no one-to-one connection between the amount of sin in a person's life and their bodily health. But the reason anyone has a disease is because of the presence of sin in the world. And the fact is that all of us have sinned. There's only person who never did, and that's Jesus.

Now, in the Old Testament, we find that God calls a people, the Israelites, to himself. He rescued them out of slavery in Egypt and then he gave them his law, which taught them how to live. And when you read through that law, particularly the book of Leviticus, you find a lot of information about skin diseases (Leviticus 13 and 14). Sometimes it's all a bit baffling to us. But the idea is that in order to be part of God's people, you had to be clean. Now, on one level, this makes perfect sense. The Israelites didn't have modern medicine and diseases are contagious. In order to protect the health of the people, those who had diseases had to be removed. They often

were placed outside the camp until they became clean, or healthy. So, the idea of keeping the unclean people on the edge of the community made perfect sense.

But the law also addresses issues in a symbolic way. The idea that you get when you read the book of Leviticus is that in order for the Israelites to approach God in worship, they needed to be pure. They needed to be cleansed of their sin. Anything that made the Israelites impure made them unfit to be in the presence of God. And since diseases are ultimately the result of sin, those who were diseased couldn't be part of the community. They were ostracized. That was a visual picture of the contagious nature of sin. Sin needed to be removed from God's people. Sin corrupts. Sin has a way of being contagious, spreading throughout one body and on to others.

Because these people had leprosy, they would have been shunned by others. They would have been considered untouchable, for to touch someone with leprosy would make that person unclean. A leper was treated like someone who was less than human. Just listen to these words, found in Leviticus 13:45–46:

⁴⁵ “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ ⁴⁶ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp. (See also Num. 5:1–4.)

So, these lepers were outcasts, people who couldn't live like everyone else. They couldn't go to the temple to worship. They couldn't be touched. That's why they stood at a distance.

Yet these people cry out to Jesus. They call him “Master,” recognizing that he has authority to heal them. They ask for mercy, to be delivered from something terrible even though they are not worthy.

What's amazing is that Jesus doesn't heal them there. He doesn't touch them. He doesn't pray. What he does is tell them to go to the priests. This is something the law of the Old Testament required. (See Leviticus 14.) The priests were the ones who would make sure a person had been healed of a skin disease, and the priest would offer sacrifices on behalf of that person. After that, the person was ceremonially clean and able to rejoin society. These people who had leprosy apparently left Jesus to go to their priests, and as they did so, they found that they were cleansed. Not only were they healed physically, but they were made clean. The power of sin had been removed. This was a miracle that Jesus performed at a distance. It shows his power: he only has to think the thought to heal people of conditions brought on by sin.

This happened to all ten of these people. Yet only one of them, when he sees that he was healed, goes back to Jesus in awe and wonder and thanksgiving. One man did this. He praised God loudly. He fell down at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And Luke tells us that he was a Samaritan.

In the eyes of Jewish people, Samaritans were unclean. They were the distant relatives of the Jews, people who could trace their lineage back to the ancient Israelites. But those Israelites had married Gentiles and had children with them. Therefore, Jews thought of Samaritans as not pure, as half-breeds. They also didn't worship in Jerusalem. They had their own place of worship in Samaria, and they didn't accept all of the Old Testament as the word of God. Jews looked down upon Samaritans and tried to avoid them.

We're probably safe to assume that the other nine people who were cleansed were Jews and, possibly, Samaritans. It is ironic that the Samaritan is the one who recognizes that what Jesus has done is from God. The Jewish people who were healed didn't stop to praise God. Yes, they probably went to the priests and did as Jesus told them to do. But they didn't seem to have the same faith that this one Samaritan man had.

That's why Jesus asks some rhetorical questions. He asks, "Were not ten cleansed?" Yes, of course. "Where are the other nine?" They're long gone. "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Apparently not. In Jesus' view, the only one who truly praised God was this one man, the Samaritan. And Jesus commends this man. He tells him that his faith has made him well.

Now, the others who were healed did cry out to Jesus. But apparently they lacked faith. This shows that people will sometimes call upon God when they're in trouble. People who are sick sometimes ask for prayer, and they often won't mind if you pray for them. But God isn't just some cosmic butler who stands waiting at our beck and call when we feel like we need him. He's not a genie that grants us our wishes. God is King. He is Lord. He is Master. He made us to serve him and worship him and obey him. Yes, he graciously answers prayer. But he should also be praised and thanked. People who truly have faith in God are people who are thankful. The mark of God's children should be praise and thanksgiving.

We see examples of thanks throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, people who lacked faith grumbled, even after God gave them good things. That's often the story of the Israelites—many of them were a bunch of stiff-necked ingrates.

But certainly not all. David, the great King of Israel, though certainly not a perfect man, thanked God. When he conquered the city of Jerusalem and made it the center of Israelite's worship, the ark of the covenant was brought into the city and into the tabernacle. And then David praised God. This is from 1 Chronicles 16:

- ⁸ Oh give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples!
⁹ Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wondrous works!
¹⁰ Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!
¹¹ Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually!
¹² Remember the wondrous works that he has done,
his miracles and the judgments he uttered,
¹³ O offspring of Israel his servant,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones! (1 Chron. 16:8–13)

³⁵ Say also:

- “Save us, O God of our salvation,
and gather and deliver us from among the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise.
³⁶ Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!”

Then all the people said, “Amen!” and praised the LORD. (1 Chron. 16:35–36)

Before David died and left the kingdom to his son, Solomon, he arranged for materials to be gathered to build the temple in Jerusalem. When people freely gave massive amounts of gold, silver, bronze, and iron, as well as precious stones, he praised God. He said:

- “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever.
¹¹ Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory
and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the
kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. ¹² Both riches and honor
come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in
your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. ¹³ And now we thank you,
our God, and praise your glorious name. (1 Chron. 29:10–13)

This is how we should respond to anything that happens in our lives. When we experience any measure of goodness, we should thank God. We can thank God for answered prayers, but also a meal. We can thank God for a new job or a raise or when someone we loved

is healed. But we can and should also thank God for a sunrise, for another day to be alive, for clothing and shelter and the bare necessities of life. We should be thankful for all things.

Yet our problem is that we often aren't thankful. In the book of Romans, a letter written by the apostle Paul, he says that the great problem of humanity is our failure to worship God as we ought. And this is true of everyone, whether they are familiar with the Bible or not. He says that everyone stands under God's wrath because though we are aware of God's existence, we ignore him. We go our own way. We worship someone or something other than God. There's one line in Paul's description of the plight of humanity that stands out. He says, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Rom. 1:21). If one important mark of God's children is that they're thankful, one of the most important marks of sinners is that they're not thankful.

Yet Paul goes on to say that though all have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and have deserved death, God has given an amazing gift to all who have the faith to receive it. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Jesus, the Son of God, was sent to the world to save people from sin (Matt. 1:21). He is the only one who never sinned, the perfectly righteous man (who also happens to be God). Though he's the only who has not earned God's punishment for sin, being cast out of the camp forever, so to speak, he died a sinner's death, bearing God's wrath on the cross. All who trust Jesus have had their sins paid for in full, and they are credited with his perfect standing. They are given the priceless gift of eternal life.

Salvation from sin and eternal death is a gift. It is something we have not deserved or earned. We're not entitled to it. Paul knew this. That's why he thanks God in the book of Romans for salvation. After describing how we don't have the power within us to live godly lives, he writes this, in Romans 7:24–25:

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

In another letter, 1 Corinthians, Paul talks at length about the reality that Jesus, after dying on the cross, rose from the grave. His resurrection demonstrated that his sacrifice for sin was acceptable, that he is the Son of God, and that he has power of sin and death. After boldly

stating that death has no victory over Christians, Paul writes, “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he often writes about his own personal suffering. Paul forfeited a comfortable place within Jewish society to be Jesus’ messenger, someone who went to others to tell them about what God has done in and through Jesus. Paul often endured rejection, beatings, difficult travels, and imprisonment in order to tell others about Jesus. Yet even in the midst of suffering, Paul was thankful. He wrote this to those Christians in Corinth: “For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15). Paul knew that as more people came to Jesus, it would lead to more thankful people, and this would glorify, or praise, God. Why does God graciously save people from sin? So they would be thankful. But not only that. So that they would praise him. Elsewhere, Paul says that God saves us “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6) and “to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:12, 14).

God wants us to thank him. He wants our thanks to be a large part of our worship of him. He delivers us from bad things not so that we would have easier lives, but so that we would thank him and praise him. Yet so much of our society pushes us in the other direction. We’re not taught to be thankful. We’re not led to think about all the good things we have. Paul says, in another letter, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8). Commercials, news, and social media don’t lead us to think about the things we’re thankful for.

Remember, our problem is our lack of gratitude to God. Just the other day, I was listening to a new album by a man named Drew Holcomb. I’m pretty sure he’s a Christian, because his wife, Ellie Holcomb, is a singer who has made explicitly Christian albums. In one of his new songs, he sings:

You want what you can't have.
Since the Garden of Eden it's been like that.
You can't tear down the tree, or pull all the weeds,
Spend your life looking for the greener grass.²

² Drew Holcomb and the Neighbors, “You Want What You Can’t Have,” from the 2019 album, *Dragons* (Magnolia Music).

Of course, people do spend their whole lives looking for greener grass. But they end up feeling like they're missing out, like the good things are "over there" somewhere. The pursuit of something better is endless. It causes us not to dwell on all the good things we already have, but to focus on that which we don't have. It doesn't lead us to be thankful, but to feel empty. In the very next song on that same album, Drew Holcomb sings,

Maybe we're not supposed to try everything.
Maybe we're lost in what we want, not what we need.
Everything is never enough, takes you away from what you love.
Maybe we're not supposed to try everything.³

So, how should we respond to this message? With faith. Jesus can cleanse us of our uncleanness, which comes through sin. Sin taints everything in our lives. We can't defeat it or root it out of ourselves. Only Jesus can remove our sin. But he does this only for those who turn to him in faith. If you're not a Christian, cry out to God for mercy. Acknowledge that you have not been thankful. You haven't wanted God and his glory. You've wanted what you can't have. You have turned away from God and made other things more important in your life. You've not lived life on God's terms. Tell God that you don't have an excuse, that you're sorry for your sin, and that you realize that the only way to be acceptable in his eyes is to turn to his Son, Jesus.

If you are a Christian, be thankful. That's something that Paul tells Christians repeatedly. In the book of Colossians, he tells us to walk in the ways of Jesus, and to be "abounding in thanksgiving" (Col. 2:6-7). He tells us to live as people who love, people who forgive others because we have been forgiven, people who let "the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts." And then he adds, quite simply, "And be thankful" (Col. 3:15). Then, he says, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17). In 1 Thessalonians, he says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:16-17). God wants us to be thankful.

Here are some things we can thank God for:

Thank God for simply existing. Thank God for the gift of life.

³ Drew Holcomb and the Neighbors, "Maybe," from the 2019 album, *Dragons* (Magnolia Music).

Thank God for your parents and your upbringing. Thank God for the people who gave you life and who helped shape your life. God saw fit to have you be born and raised in a certain time and place. Stop and think about all the good things that came from that, and thank God.

Thank God for whatever natural abilities and gifts you have. If you have a body that's healthy and strong, thank him for that. If you have a good mind, thank him for that. If you have a mind for music, or the ability to work hard, or the ability to be cheerful even in difficult circumstances, thank God for that.

If you've had education, thank God for that. If you can read and write, thank him for that.

If you have clean water, thank God. Not everyone in the world has that. If you have enough food to eat, thank God. Not everyone in the world has access to healthy food, and enough of it.

Thank God for a place to live, clothes to wear, for transportation.

Thank God for medical care.

Thank God even for difficult things in your life. If you look back over your life and consider times that were painful, what we would often call trials, you can see that in those times, God was doing something. He was teaching you something. Perhaps he was orchestrating something in your life and in the lives of others that wouldn't have happened without that pain. We should be thankful even for trials, even for sufferings. God uses those things for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28). Perhaps one of the marks of a Christian is thanking God even when things don't seem to go our way.

Above all, thank God for salvation, for adopting you into his family. Thank him for the gift of eternal life. Thank him now, because that's what Christians will be doing throughout eternity. The book of Revelation gives us various images of what people will do in heaven and in the new creation, the perfect world that God will create when heaven and Earth become one. We find this image in Revelation 7:9–12:

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."