

# “Jesus . . . on Gratitude”

Psalm 136; Luke 17:11-19 <sup>1</sup>

Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem for the last time. As He had done before, Jesus chose to journey through Samaria, the land of outcasts, rather than to travel around it, as most Jews did. And, as had been the case on at least one previous occasion, Jesus was on His way to Samaria for a divine appointment. When Jesus and the disciples came to the border between Galilee and Samaria, they encountered ten lepers “standing at a distance.” At least one of these men was a Samaritan. The rest were apparently Jews.

As hurricane Sandy pounded the northeast a year ago this week, one of the things that almost surely happened is that people who normally would not associate with each other found common cause in their shared misery. When our lives are reduced to the level of sheer survival, we tend to pull together. Disaster relief workers see this all the time. It was so with these lepers. Their common need caused them to disregard the artificial boundaries of race and religion that they had once thought so important.

Lepers lived even more dreadful lives in biblical times than they do now. In those days of medical infancy, virtually any chronic skin condition was considered to be leprosy, and persons so afflicted were banished from any contact with those who were “healthy.” The Law of Moses said that “*Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp*” (Leviticus 13:45-46).

Such was the life these ten men were living in common misery. Knowing who Jesus was, the men called out to Him, “*Jesus, Master, have pity on us!*” (Luke 17:13). Jesus looked at them and said six words: “*Go, show yourselves to the priests*” (Luke 17:14). In those days, the priests were charged with the physical as well as the spiritual well-being of the people, and the Law of Moses gave specific instructions about how priests were to determine whether or not the illness had been healed.

Notice that Jesus did not simply heal the men by speaking to them. As He almost always did, Jesus required a faith response on their part, telling them to go to the Temple for examination. And as they obeyed Him, their leprosy disappeared. One of the men, realizing that he had been healed, turned around and ran back to Jesus, “*praising God in a loud voice.*” The man fell on his face before Jesus and thanked Him . . . *and the man was a Samaritan.*

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus told a story that turned Jewish prejudice on its head, and here was a man who proved that point again. Jesus received the man’s thanks and blessed him, but He also added, “*Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?*”

Jesus healed ten men as easily as He healed one, and that by simply speaking a word of command, as we saw last week. The pictures we sometimes see that portray Jesus as a pasty-white, somewhat effeminate political activist miss the mark at every point. Jesus’ skin was not white at all, but Middle-Eastern bronze. He was no pampered weakling, but a muscular carpenter who made His living wielding hammers and saws, chisels and beams.

And in moments such as this, we get a glimpse of the fact that this seemingly humble carpenter is the Power who brought into being all that exists simply by saying “Come forth!” (Colossians 1:15-17). And only one out of ten said, “Thanks!”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 3, 2013.

It's actually pretty easy to overlook opportunities to express gratitude, isn't it? It's awfully easy to take the good things that come into our lives for granted. Randy Frazee, pastor of Pantego Baptist Church in Fort Worth told this story:

I remember seeing a picture of a husband and wife in a gentleman's office. I said, "Nice picture." I turned around and looked at the man, and he had tears in his eyes. So I asked him, "Why are you crying?"

He said, "There was a time in our marriage when I was unfaithful to my wife, and she found out about it. She was so deeply hurt and injured she was going to leave me and take the kids with her. I was overwhelmed at the mistake I had made, and I shut the affair down. I went to my wife in total brokenness. Knowing I did not deserve for her to answer in the affirmative, I asked her to forgive me. And she forgave me.

"This picture was taken shortly after that. When I see this picture, I see a woman who forgave me. I see a woman who was willing to stand with me in this picture. So when you see this picture you say, 'Nice picture.' But when I see this picture I see my life given back to me again."<sup>2</sup>

That's what the man healed from leprosy realized—his life had been given back to him again.

Scott Hafemann has written that the essence of sin is not ingratitude but *misguided* gratitude. It's our nature, he says, to thank *somebody* for what we experience and achieve, and the object of our gratitude becomes the object of our worship and service.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that we quite often direct our gratitude toward the wrong benefactor—frequently ourselves. Frank Sinatra's "I Did It My Way" was a song of arrogant and misguided gratitude . . . toward himself. And Scripture reminds us that "*There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death*" (Proverbs 14:12, 16:25).

The fact that Frank Sinatra could sing at all was the gift of God. There were surely many, many people who encouraged him along the way, who were his teachers and mentors, who believed in him and who gave him an opportunity to showcase his talent. Apparently Frank missed that. As Moses warned Israel long ago,

*When you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in, and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, that is the time to be careful. Do not become proud at that time and forget the LORD your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt. Do not forget that he led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with poisonous snakes and scorpions, where it was so hot and dry. He gave you water from the rock! He fed you with manna in the wilderness, a food unknown to your ancestors. He did this to humble you and test you for your own good. He did it so you would never think that it was your own strength and energy that made you wealthy. Always remember that it is the LORD your God who gives you power to become rich, and he does it to fulfill the covenant he made with your ancestors (Deuteronomy 8:12-18, NLT).*

Anything good there is in your life and in my life is there primarily because of the grace of God and because of the investments of other people in our lives. You and I don't stand on the ground, nor do we stand on foundations of our own making. We stand always and forever on

<sup>2</sup> Randy Frazee, in the sermon "Uncommon Confessions," preached on June 24, 2001 at the Pantego Baptist Church.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Crossway, 2001), p. 36.

the shoulders of others who have poured their lives into ours, and when we understand this, we give glory to God!

This much is relatively easy, once we allow God to deal with our pride. The key to gratitude is not thinking more of ourselves than we ought to think (Romans 12:3). But there is a word more challenging still. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul wrote, “*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*” Wow. I’m not sure I’m up to that. Be thankful, no matter what happens!?

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom wrote about being imprisoned with her sister Betsy in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. The barracks was extremely crowded and infested with fleas. One day they read this verse from their tattered Bible, and Betsy said, “Corrie, we’ve got to give thanks for this barracks and even for these fleas.”

Corrie replied, “There’s no way I’m going to thank God for fleas.” But Betsy persisted, and thank God they did. In the months that followed, the Nazi guards rarely came into the barracks. Corrie and Betsy were able to talk, pray, and study the Bible with little hindrance. The barracks was their only place of refuge. Later they learned that the guards never entered their barracks *because of the fleas.*<sup>4</sup>

Tim Klimmek was the Supply Officer on my first destroyer, and a good friend of mine. Tim was a relatively new Christian, and he took a refreshingly straightforward approach to matters of faith and life. On one occasion, I was riding with Tim from Charleston, South Carolina to Augusta, Georgia to see Jill, when the transmission went out on Tim’s old Volvo. Our trip came to an abrupt end, and we had to be towed back into Charleston. As you probably know, transmission repairs tend to be pretty expensive, but Tim smiled as we waited for the tow truck, “Well, it’s all God’s money, and if God wants to spend it on a transmission, I guess that’s okay with me.” “*Be thankful, no matter what happens.*”

Back in the early thirties, William Stidger was seated one day with a group of friends in a restaurant. Everyone was talking about the depression: how terrible it was, the suffering people, rich people committing suicide, the jobless, the whole thing. The conversation got more and more miserable as it went on. There was a minister in the group, and he suddenly broke in and said, “I don’t know what I’m going to do, because in two or three weeks I have to preach a sermon on Thanksgiving Day. I want to say something affirmative. What can I say that’s affirmative in a period of world depression like this?” And as the minister spoke, Stidger said it was like the Spirit of God spoke to him: “Why don’t you give thanks to those people who have been a blessing in your life and affirm them during this terrible time?”

He began to think about that. The thought came to his mind of a schoolteacher very dear to him, a wonderful teacher of poetry and English literature from years ago who had gone out of her way to put a great love of literature and verse in him. It affected all his writings and his preaching. So he sat down and wrote a letter to this woman, now up in years. It was only a matter of days until he got a reply in the feeble scrawl of the aged. “My Dear Willy”—Stidger says at that time he was about 50 years of age and was bald, and no one had called him Willy for a long time, so just the opening sentence warmed his heart. Here’s the letter:

“My Dear Willy: I can’t tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my eighties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, and lonely, like the last leaf of autumn lingering behind. You’ll be interested to know that I taught school for more than

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<sup>4</sup> John Yates, “An Attitude of Gratitude,” *Preaching Today* tape no. 110. See Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, written with John and Elizabeth Sherrill (1971; Bantam reprint 1984).

fifty years, and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning, and it cheered me as nothing has done in many years.”

Stidger says, “I’m not sentimental, but I found myself weeping over that note.” Then he thought of a kindly bishop, now retired, an old man who had recently faced the death of his wife and was all alone. This bishop had taken a lot of time, given him advice and counsel and love when he first began his ministry. So he sat down and wrote the old bishop. In two days a reply came back.

“My Dear Will: Your letter was so beautiful, so real, that as I sat reading it in my study, tears fell from my eyes, tears of gratitude. Before I realized what I was doing, I rose from my chair and I called her name to share it with her, forgetting she was gone. You’ll never know how much your letter has warmed my spirit. I have been walking around in the glow of your letter all day long.”<sup>5</sup>

Alice Badgett taught English at Southwest High School in Atlanta, Georgia. I was in her fifth period class when we got the news that President Kennedy had been shot. We students all thought Ms. Badgett was a hard teacher. She made us diagram sentences until we thought we would die. She required us to write essay after essay, and to virtually memorize the entire *Harcourt, Brace & World English Grammar*.

The truth is that we students weren’t all that fond of Alice Badgett. But you know, I learned a lot about how to put words together in her class. Whatever skill I possess as a wordsmith I attribute in large part to Alice Badgett, and as I later understood how important that grammar book was, I bought one for myself, and it’s on the shelf in my office.

I don’t remember what brought her to mind, but during our years in Louisville I became reminded of Alice’s contribution to my life, and I decided to try to find her. She had long since retired from the public schools, and I discovered that she was living in a small town in North Carolina. I called her to thank her for investing herself in a bunch of ungrateful kids nearly forty years ago. Her voice was still very familiar, and it was filled with emotion as one of “Alice’s kids” called home to say “Thanks!”

Coyle Stephenson was my first supervisor as a Chaplain Intern at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas during the fall of 1979. God brought Coyle to mind thirty years later on an April morning, and I wrote him a letter that began like this:

“Dear Coyle,

“I was thinking recently of important people in my life, and I’m not sure I’ve ever thanked you for your investment in me. Even if I have, it’s worth doing again!

“You might possibly remember me as one of your more difficult Basic CPE students in the fall and winter of 1979-1980. I was amazingly self-unaware, with issues all over the place, and resistant to discovering them. You made all sorts of heroic efforts to break through my resistance, which did eventually begin to bear fruit before the year was out.

“The main thing I want to thank you for is for caring about me as much as I knew you did, and for not giving up on me (Joe later told me that the two of you nearly decided I was incorrigible). Had it not been for you, my life and ministry would probably have been a disaster. *Thank you.*”

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<sup>5</sup> David Seamands, “Instruction for Thanksgiving,” *Preaching Today*, tape no. 62.

Not long after, I received a letter from Coyle that has gotten filed somewhere in our move to Columbia, but I'll never forget the fact that Coyle's letter was stained with tears.

Psalm 136, the responsive psalm of gratitude that we read together earlier, reminds us that God's love comes to us in many, many ways. Because of the love of Jesus, you and I can know the joy, the peace, the freedom, and the hope of forgiveness. God is able to use even fleas and broken transmissions to give us cause for thanks, if we have eyes to see. And much of the time, God's love comes to us through other people. How long has it been since you made the effort to say "Thank You" to some of those people in your life?

*"Didn't I heal ten men?"* Jesus asks. *"Where are the other nine?"* (Luke 17:17).