

Return to Give Thanks

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Healing of the Ten Lepers" Byzantine mosaic (12th century)

Prayer of Illumination

O Lord our God, your Word is
a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.
Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love,
that we may be obedient to your will
and live always for your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Savior.
Amen.

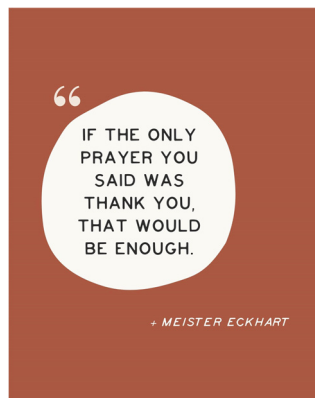
Gospel Reading: Luke 17:11-19 (NRSVue)

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, 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 made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine?" ¹⁸ Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – *Return to Give Thanks*



Jesus said to the Grateful Samaritan who came back, "*your faith has made you well.*" You can say in addition, "*your gratitude made you well.*" There is a fascinating connection between: Faith, gratitude, and well-being.

A 2015 article in the popular journal **Scientific American** reported that, out of 24 strengths, including such heavy hitters as love, hope, kindness, and creativity, the single best predictor of good relationships and emotional wellbeing was...*any idea?*... **Gratitude.**

This isn't an isolated finding either. Other scientific studies have proven the healing power of gratitude. Nothing drives out our toxic emotions of resentment, anger, and envy like gratitude. Grateful people sleep better, are less depressed and tired, have lower levels of inflammation, and decreased risks of heart disease. Gratitude reduces stress, increases relaxation, and boosts our immune system.

There's more: it has the ability to increase our willpower, nourish relationships, spirituality, creativity, and helps our body heal and recover faster. Gratitude builds hardiness and motivation. The higher your gratitude, the lower your chances of anxiety, panic, and substance abuse. And it increases your life expectancy. Gratitude is a no brainer.

Gratitude has been described as the key that unlocks the door of joyfulness. The more grateful we are, the more alive and human we are. The more spiritually attuned we are. Gratitude is revolutionary because it alters our vision: we see and experience the world in technicolor through grateful eyes. Gratitude grounds us: Life owes me nothing. All the good I have is a gift. Take nothing for granted.

The beauty of gratitude is that it helps us feel good and then to do good. And it's contagious. Without gratitude, we can't grow and flourish. There's something magical about not just taking a gift. Gratitude deepens our experience of how precious life is.

Take for example, when we receive a gift. When we are grateful, we see how special the gift is. We savor it. We don't take it for granted. We savor the thought, effort, and expense involved. And then, like the Grateful Samaritan, we cherish not only the gift, but the giver of the gift. We appreciate the gift AND the giver.

Let's take a closer look at our gospel reading. Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem—his city of destiny where he would ultimately fulfill his mission and be crucified. Along the way, he came through the borderlands of Galilee and Samaria, and there Jesus encountered ten men who had leprosy. Leprosy created its own boundaries of separation. "Unclean" lepers had to social distance—not six feet, but as one ancient authority wrote, fifty yards of social distancing from the "Clean." Leprosy was not only painful, it was a lonely existence. Isolation from family and society. Ironically, leprosy created a community of alienated souls. It brought together rather strange bedfellows. At least one or more of the ten was Samaritan, the others, Jews. With leprosy, it didn't matter if you were Jew or Samaritan, you were just an outsider—ostracized and unclean, together. So the ten outcasts called out to Jesus from a distance, saying not, "Unclean, unclean," but rather: *"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."* These are the ones—the lepers—the least of these, to whom Jesus came to make clean and whole.

But Jesus goes about the healing in an unusual way—he doesn't heal the ten men on the spot. Rather, he calls back to them, just like they did to him: *"Go and show yourselves to the priests."* Jesus told them to leave—*while they still had leprosy*. It was a test of faith. He didn't even tell them they were healed. The priests gave the final authority to declare that the skin disease was gone and they could return to society, return to their families.

Jesus was doing something very special. He was making them a part of the healing process. It was a call to "trust and obey"—to step out in faith that the healing would come *if* they did what he said. **And all ten did.** We read, *"While they were on their way"* or **"AS THEY WENT"**...they were made clean—all ten. They all cried out to Jesus, obeyed Jesus, and were healed, ...but only one of the ten "saw" that he was healed. He noticed. He was paying attention. This is where we see the power of gratitude at work.

Gratitude sees the good. It also inspires action, makes that extra effort. What did the Grateful Samaritan do? He returned. He went back to give thanks. This story is not only about the healing power of Jesus, this story is about the healing power of gratitude.

THANKING IS BELIEVING.

THANKING IS HEALING.

THANKING GOD IS WORSHIPPING GOD.

Gratitude fills us with the joy of receiving. It melts away our pride or feelings of indebtedness or laziness or self-consciousness that might hold us back. We see it as a gift freely given, no matter if we deserve it or not.

Gratitude reminds us *everything* is a gift—

- each meal at the table, each sip of clean water,
- each breath we draw,
- the roof over your head,
- each good night's sleep.
- A kind word or act,

It's all grace, all a gift.

Gratitude opens our eyes to how much we *already* have. We appreciate not only the gifts, but the Giver of the gifts. And so the lone Grateful Samaritan threw himself at the feet of Jesus and said one of the best prayers we could ever utter: **THANKS**.

He wasn't bashful about his gratitude. From the **bottom of his heart** and at the **top of his lungs** he praised God with a loud voice. The Grateful Samaritan was bold. He goes not to the Temple, but to the Teacher. "*I say unto you,*" says Jesus, "*One who is greater than the temple is here.*"

Go to Jesus, a person, not a place, and you will encounter God. You will experience a restored and renewed relationship—with God and with others. Healing. No matter how unclean you feel, or if you feel like an outcaste or outsider, Christ makes the unclean, clean. And Jesus reminds us of another important lesson: we've got a lot to learn from Samaritans. Don't count people out.

Gratitude helps keep us open and learning, where we can learn about faith from anyone—from other religions other ethnicities, from those different from us, from those outside our circle, from those across the aisle, members of the other party, or even from those we're suspicious of.

God is good to all, to the just and the unjust. But don't let it be just a one-way road. Respond in gratitude to God. God wants to be in relationship with us, to covenant with us. Jesus doesn't just want to cure you, He wants to commune with you.

Jesus asked three questions:

- 1) *Where are the other nine?*
- 2) *Were not ten made clean?*
- 3) *Was none of them found to return and give praise to God, except this foreigner?*

Don't miss the greatest moment of your life—leave the ten and join the one. The greatest opportunity you'll ever have is to return to Jesus and say "thank you." Go in the direction of healing—which is always *Jesusward*. "*Rise up,*" says Jesus, "*Go on your way, your faith has made you well.*"

Gratitude helps us **rise up** and **rise above** our self-pity, resentment, frustration, and disappointment. When Jesus says "RISE UP" or GET UP, it comes from the same root word as "resurrection." Gratitude is a resurrection. It helps us rise above it all and to go on our way. It keeps us from getting stuck and spinning our wheels. Gratitude keeps us moving forward.

You don't have to give thanks for bad things you're facing like chronic pain or lousy circumstances, but gratitude helps us give thanks "IN" our challenges. When gratitude is missing from our lives, part of our humanity is missing. But when gratitude is present, it seeps into our entire lives—our past, our future, and or present.



I love how Maya Angelou puts it:

*If you must look back, do so forgivingly.
If you must look forward, do so prayerfully.
However, the wisest thing you can do is
be present in the present...gratefully.*

To conclude, I'd like to share some ways we can Safeguard ourselves from **Gratitude Deficit Disorder**.

So, what are some rituals you have in your life?

For me it's:

- preparing my morning coffee the night before,
- drinking my morning coffee,
- making eggs for breakfast,
- washing dishes after meals,
- working out at the gym,
- prayer times,
- walking the dogs, feeding the dogs,
- answering email,
- brushing and flossing my teeth at night.

We all have ingrained habits. We just do them. We'd feel something was missing if we didn't do these things. One of the most vital habits we could ever cultivate is the practice of gratitude. It's a decision to notice and see the giftedness of life. Set up gratitude cues in your life:

- *I will give thanks to God before each meal.*
- *I will share three things I'm thankful for before bed.*

Social scientists call these things "**gratitude interventions**." The more we do it, the more normal and natural it will feel to us. The better at it we become.

Finally, Robert Emmons shares in his small, but powerful book *The Little Book of Gratitude*, what he calls the “**ARC**” of gratitude.

A is for AMPLIFIES:

Gratitude searches for and amplifies the good we see in ourselves, in others, and in the world. It doesn't ignore the bad, but it focuses on what's working. Shines the light on what's good. If you look for the good, you'll find it. In fact, the attitude of gratitude multiplies and magnifies the good. Attracts the good. And it's contagious.

R is for RESCUES:

Gratitude rescues us from negativity, entitlement, resentment, and mindlessness. The spiritual art of appreciation rescues us from getting derailed by toxic thinking. It gets us back on track to joy and serenity.

Finally, C is for CONNECTS:

Gratitude's the moral cement, the all-purpose glue, the emotional calk that squeezes into the cracks between people, strengthening and bonding these relationships. When we're grateful, no one's take for granted. The Arc of Gratitude: it amplifies, rescues, and connects.

Immanuel, let's follow in the footsteps of The Grateful Samaritan, and let's experience with him the spiritual truth that “thanking” is believing.

Amen.

Sermon Art: “*Healing of the Ten Lepers*” Byzantine mosaic (12th century), Photo © Alfredo Dagli Orti / Art Resource, NY.

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