

Returning Thanks

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to turn to the passage that we read together in Luke's Gospel, chapter 16, particularly the section about the Ten Leppers.

Now I realize that for the kids the worksheet might be a bit simplistic for some of the older kids, okay? So if you want to write an essay, that's fine.

Just write over the coloured bit, okay? But for some of the kids it might be okay today. It's just some questions and some things to colour in. But I want particularly to think about the event that happened when Jesus was going towards Jerusalem with the cleansing of the lepers, ten lepers, were cleansed by Jesus and one comes back, okay?

Now we live in a land of plenty, don't we? We have really everything that we need. We have cold, fresh water. We have warm homes.

You've all come from homes where you've got food in the cupboards, clothes are plenty, and maybe even more so now following Christmas and the presents that you got at Christmas time.

[1 : 12] And there is a danger for us when we have, because you know, it's all relative in some ways, maybe sometimes we don't think that's the case, but we're in whatever is the top point, something percent of rich people in the world here in Scotland, in the UK.

And the danger is maybe that we take our wealth and our provisions and the things that we've got for granted and that we're ungrateful for them. I always kind of laugh, sometimes laugh and it's a kind of, it's a laugh and it's a bit of a cry.

Because when you've been framed as on this time of year, as you know, guys my age like you've been framed, it's kind of nice and harmless and there's lots of funny videos from people that have sent them in.

And that Christmas one's always a bit boring because it's always about Christmas trees falling over with cats jumping on them and things like that. But there's always a kind of funny but sad one when a little child gets this big present and he's excited and he's really looking forward to it when he rips it open and it's a wooly jumper and he kind of just throws it on the ground and stomps off in a rage, you know, and really angry that that's not what they were wanting, a toy, something or other and they weren't wanting a wooly jumper and they just stamp their feet and they walk out of the room.

It's quite funny but it's also quite sad, isn't it? Tell you, it wouldn't have happened in our house. Even if they thought it, it wouldn't have happened because we should be grateful for what we receive and it's a mark of ingratitude, isn't it, in our children when they grow up to, or when they're children and they receive something like that and they're ungrateful and they throw it aside as absolutely what they not wanted.

[2 : 57] G.K. Chesterton, a great philosopher and theologian or at least Christian, said, I would maintain that thanks is one of the highest forms of thought and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.

It's a great phrase, isn't it? That gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder. And I think at the end of the year it's good for us as believers, as Christians, to remember with great gratitude all that we've been given spiritually, what we receive from the Lord Jesus Christ, what we have by faith, both the temporal, the ordinary things that we have and also the spiritual gifts that we have received.

It's very easy for us to regard our faith and our commitment to Christ and to church and to the knowledge of the gospel as very ordinary and plain, a bit dull.

This is an exciting time of year. There's lots happening and, well, the Christian side of it's all a bit dull for us and we cast aside prayer for the routine of prayer and Bible reading and even church because it's all a bit ordinary and we want to do something different.

And there can be, in us, a lack of gratitude because we've stopped being thankful and having gratitude which is doubled by wonder. I often feel that certainly in my Christianity the wonder has gone from my relationship with the living God.

[4 : 31] Stop looking for the wonder and the amazement and the majesty and the beauty of belonging to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

So we have this story of the ten lepers as a great indication of what God is wanting us to think about and how God thinks and how Jesus responds to a lack of thanksgiving.

So there was these ten guys, this is not a parable, and that's important to remember, it's not a parable, it's a real event that Jesus is involved in healing these guys.

We know that there was other parables that told stories, but this is a real story that Jesus was involved in as he was moving toward Jerusalem.

Leprosy was a desperate disease. We may have lost sight of that today because it's almost been eradicated, although I do believe it's coming back into the world in different places.

[5 : 33] It's a desperate disease that just eats away your body in many ways. And in the ancient Near East it was a disease that led to great isolation, there was no cure for it.

They were regarded as, anyone who was a leper was regarded as unclean. You know, we've taken that into our vocabulary. So you know, if you're a leper, someone who is ostracized, who's outside who is unclean, and they had no hope really, and there was no, there was nothing to support them, they just had to beg for their lives.

And in this story, Jesus on his way to Jerusalem was going through Samaria and Galilee, and he stood, there was ten lepers, and they stood at a distance and lifted their voice, and Jesus have mercy on us.

We don't know anything about their background, we don't know how they knew about Jesus, but they did know about Jesus, they had maybe heard of other lepers who had been healed, or other people who had been cured, or people who had met or heard His teaching.

And it's interesting, isn't it, that all they do is they cry for mercy? At this point they don't even ask for healing.

[6 : 50] It's not like the blind sometimes who ask, please, I want to be healed, I want to be able to see. I'm sure that was in their thinking, I'm sure that was what was in their minds and their hearts, but they simply cry out for mercy, have mercy on us Jesus, have mercy, because their position was pitiable, and they longed for somebody, somebody like Jesus who they'd heard about, to have mercy, to have pity on them.

And so we find that Jesus simply gives them a command, go and show yourselves to the priests.

Now they would have known what that meant, we sometimes wonder, why did they say that? Because when a leper did receive healing miraculously, and I guess in some instances presumably they were healed in other ways, but when they were healed they had to go to the priest to be declared clean, because they were unclean, and the priest was able to tell whether the leprosy had been cured and was able to grant them a bill of health from the priest.

And the great, it's a really interesting story, because we're told that that's what Jesus says, and it just then says, as they went, they were cleansed, just as they were going.

So they went to the priest in obedience to Jesus' command, and as they were going, they were cleansed. So as they were walking towards the priest to get the, what they presumed would have been a bill of health, presumably they went in faith obeying Jesus' command, but they were healed as they went out in obedience.

[8 : 49] Now that's a great mark of the power and of the miraculous healing that Jesus was able to do.

And we're told that one of them, immediately, one of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell in his face at Jesus' feet and gave thanks, and he was a Samaritan.

One returned immediately. I'll say a little bit more about that in a minute. But take note also that it was a Samaritan that returned.

We're not sure of the ethnic background of all the others. The presumption is that they were Jews. This guy was a Samaritan who was doubly ostracized.

He was doubly on the outside in that society. He was the most rejected, but he was the most thankful, and he immediately returns back to Jesus.

[9 : 53] Now I believe that the major teaching of this passage here is the importance of thanksgiving.

The, where it's placed in the chapter, and we'll look at that in a moment, it's in the context of the need for healing in our lives and the need for God's mercy and the reality of being made well by God spiritually as believers, the importance of expressed, committed gratitude.

Jesus speaks into this situation. He heals and one returns with thankfulness, and Jesus speaks into that, because I think what we have here is a little unpacking of Jesus' mind when he is involved in this.

There's physical, mental and spiritual energy has been given out by Jesus Christ in this healing, and he sees the guys going off, and they're healed by Him, and one of them returns.

And then Jesus says, we're not ten cleansed? Well, where are the nine?

[11 : 06] Where's everyone else? What was no one found to return and praise God, except this foreigner? Or to give God the glory, could be translated.

And he says, and rise up, go your way, your faith has made you well. It's really interesting words. But the interesting theme here is that Christ can't hide His disappointment.

Christ can't hide His disappointment, the only one came back. He knew they were going to be healed. And it wasn't a kind of selfish peak, oh, I've done this great miracle, and I've come back.

It's not that He's kind of hurt in the way that we sometimes are hurt when people don't return thanks to us. But He's disappointed because what He has done has been for God and for the glory of God, and no one found a return here to praise God, to give glory to God as a matter of urgency.

You see, it's very interesting because the context of this passage and of the passages around about it is Jesus speaking into the lives of the Jewish leaders of the day and the Jewish people, and their response to Christ.

[12 : 21] They had all the privileges, they had all the blessings, they had all the background covenant of the Old Testament, and yet they didn't love Christ and serve Christ and thank Him. They rejected Him, and that's very much the background, but He's walking up to Jerusalem, He's going to go there to be crucified.

The other nine, who the presumption is that they were Jewish, rather than the Samaritan, the other nine were more concerned about going forward to the priest, and all that that represented for them as a culture, as a religious people, than coming back immediately to thank Christ.

You see, going to the priest was for them, it was the golden nugget, it was the benanzas, it was the bingo for them to go to the priest, because if they went to the priest and were declared clean, they were no longer ostracized, they were accepted within their religion, they were accepted within their community, and therefore what we see is they were more concerned with the horizontal benefits that the healing brought than the vertical thanks to God.

They were more concerned that all of the benefits of being healed would bring to them in their community, in their culture, in their family, and that's not a bad thing, but it is if it trumps Christ, if it trumps God, if God is relegated and ignored as a result.

There was so much reason for them, not just to give thanks, or not just to go to the priest to be made clean, or to be declared clean, but to give thanks to God.

[14 : 04] They were cleansed from their leprosy, they'd been shown amazing mercy by Jesus Christ. The interesting question is which I can't answer, but which you may have asked, or you may not have, depending on the way your mind works, were they healed spiritually, or was only the one who came back, brought into relationship with Christ?

They were all healed physically, they all did do what they were asked at one level, but none of them returned back. And it's interesting that Jesus says, rise and go your way, your faith has made you well.

And that's a different word from being made clean. The root of that word for being made well is you've been saved.

You've been delivered. It's ordinarily used of God at rescuing people from their sin. So it does seem that there is a little evidence in the text that potentially this guy was the only one who really understood things.

And while the others received a physical healing, that he received both a physical and that shalom, that wellness that Jesus alone can bring. Christ can't hide His disappointment.

[15 : 30] And the question is for us, you know, for ourselves, this morning, do we give glory to God for our health, for our family, for our community?

Who gets the glory in our lives? Who's the one we look to and give thanks for our breath this morning? For the ability to put on our clothes, to come here, to go from here, to do whatever we will do.

Does God give the glory? Do we praise and thank Him for every iota of life that we receive? Or is it so often for us when our prayers are answered that we forget to come back to God and give thanks to Him for the answers He's given us?

We only need Him, in other words, when we need Him. He's the fourth emergency service. He's the one we go to when we're in desperate need. But the rest of the time, we just walk away healed, thankless, silent before Him.

That is the great challenge, isn't it, and the great temptation for us, for each of us. And in terms of our priority in lives, it's easy for our priority to be the vertical relationships we have, the acceptance in our culture and our community, even in our church.

[16 : 50] You know, God forbid it can be the case that we can matter more about the congregation than about Jesus being accepted in church, being part of the church, being declared a member, whatever it might be, is our standing, our horizontal standing with others, more significant than our vertical relationship of giving glory and praise to God.

Is there disappointment in the voice of Jesus when He says, well, where are you? When did you last come back in prayer and thanksgiving?

But for all I've given you today, for all you received, did you thank me? I realized that in a very sobering way this week when I got a text.

I was up north and I got a text, or not a text, an email checking my emails, bad, and I'm on holiday, shouldn't do it. But anyway, it was an email from a contact we have in one of the churches, one of the churches that supports Esk Valley, particularly Orlando Church in Florida, and it was an email from their missions director saying they were giving us another 110,000 dollars for church planting in Esk Valley, in Harrington, and for a mission to support a missions director in some kind of way.

And I was gobbled smacked and thrilled and excited and I texted people and I passed it on and it wasn't until this morning I thought I didn't even pray and give thanks to God.

[18 : 38] And I've prayed all year that God would show that He wants us to move forward, He wants us to carry on this work that we're doing as well, and we receive more than the gratitude and grace that we ever deserve, forget to give thanks.

Descending reality and a recognition of the selfishness that lies very much in my heart. But we see also in this passage just briefly that gratitude always reflects a true understanding of grace.

Because the context always matters. Did you notice the reflection from this morning, from Tim Keller on your bulletin sheet was it is one thing to be grateful, it's another to give thanks.

A gratitude is what you feel, thanksgiving is what you do. And the two are linked together. So the thankfulness of our heart is reflective of our understanding of grace and also of our life of obedience to Christ.

Because our life of obedience reflects a thankful heart, you know? That's the formula, if we can speak about it.

[19 : 59] If we are thankful, that's reflected in the way that we live our lives. We see that in the context of the chapter. You know, Luke puts this, pack this story of thanksgiving in the context of how we live our lives.

And there's different ways. The beginning, verses 1 to 3, is by watching how we live. If we are thankful to Jesus for what He has done for us, then He says, be careful how you live among other people.

He says, temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one who is coming. It would be better from a millstone we're hung around His neck than cast His heat, than He should cause one of these little ones to sin.

So in the context of the gospel community and our lives as Christians, if we are causing other people, it's a very unfashionable thought today. We're all very cool and individualistic in many ways.

But it's very unfashionable to speak about living our lives in such a way that is controlled so that we don't cause other people to sin. But we say, hey, I've got freedom, I can do whatever I like.

[21 : 02] I can do this and that and the next thing. And if they take offense then that's just because they're just jerks. Well, then that's not what we're to think in Christ. In Christ we're to recognize, and with thankfulness recognize, how He has changed us therefore and His patience with us, therefore our patience with living with others and our carefulness about how we interact, especially, as can I say, especially as grown-ups with children among the young who causes one of these little ones to sin or as mature Christians with Christians who have just come to faith, that we have to lead them in a godly place, in a godly way.

And if we don't, we seek forgiveness for that and we look to change our own lives. And within that, if we are thankful what grace has done for us, we forgive beyond reason.

If your brother sins rebuking him, if he repents, forgive him, sin seven times. Forgive him seven times. This speaks about an openness within the community, doesn't it, that we're willing to speak to one another about sins and be forgiven and forgive.

If we are thankful and recognize how much we have been forgiven, the immeasurable patience of the living God towards us daily, then we take that forgiving spirit into the church.

Isn't it sad that sometimes the church is the most unforgiving place in the community? It's the harshest place. It's a place where people sit and think they're God and want to judge other people.

[22 : 38] God's on my side, I know what's right. So I judge you. But shouldn't it be the most forgiving and gracious and kind place in the universe?

We forgive beyond reason when we are thankful in our hearts. But also that thankfulness recognizes the impossibility of faith. He speaks there about the disciples saying, well, increase our faith.

And the Lord said, if you had faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, you would say, be up reeded and planted. And then the saying, it would obey you. It's a recognition that not only is the life of faith impossible, but that He provides us with the ability to live that life of faith.

And that's a great reason for thanksgiving. What He's asking us, He's asking you to do, asking me to do, to be a forgiving and gracious and kind person, it's impossible to our natural minds sometimes, because sometimes we love to harbor a sense of injustice and unfairness in our hearts.

And we think, I can't possibly forgive that person. And He says, well, actually you can. Because I command you to do the impossible, but I provide you with the ability, the indwelling spirit to do that.

[23 : 57] We're not alone. You know what it's like when you're asked to do something impossible for you and you can't do it, maybe it's woodturning or maybe it's working a computer or that's me working a computer.

So I do, I ask Ali to come in, you know, and He helps me, I ask a woodturner to come. And they show me what to do. They come alongside and they help.

And it's greater than that for the Christian, the Holy Spirit actually empowers us. He's the counselor who comes alongside, but He actually empowers us to do the impossible, to be like Jesus.

We're asked to be like Jesus. And that thankfulness is also what gives us a servant spirit in chapters, verses 7, it speaks about the servant and having a servant spirit.

It's kind of alien to our understanding and our culture to talk about a servant and a servant spirit because we don't have servants. I'm going to say nothing.

[25 : 03] Well, we were to have a servant spirit, you know. I think it's what Jesus tried to get across here is that if we have a lack of thankfulness, it's because we have a different expectation of God.

We really expect God to be thanking us that He's indebted to us. Well, God, it's the 30th of December and I got up for church for 11.

You should be really grateful, God, and thankful that I'm so committed and I've done that. Thank you. Please say thank you, God, to me because of what I've done.

And you should be grateful for all I do for you, how much I give and how much I read and how much knowledge I've got. Are you thankful to me, God, for all of these things?

Are you going to jump to my tune? No, I know that's, I'm exaggerating. But sometimes that's how we see God in that place.

[26 : 07] We don't see Him as God and the one to whom ultimately when we've done our very best in Christ at the end of our lives, we can only say, well, we're only unworthy servants.

You've given us everything and you're God. And the amazing thing is when we see God as God of the New Testament, of the Bible, paradoxically, we recognize Him as the great God who actually came to serve, who Himself became a servant, who washed the disciples' feet, who died in the cross, and that is what enables us to have a servant spirit because He's not this kind of distant, iconic figure that we fear with fear rather than with awe, who is unattainable and far from us demanding.

He's rather this God who came and emptied Himself and became a servant and that when we have the gratitude to recognize that, then it helps us to have a servant spirit ourselves with others, seeing the beauty of grace and God.

And it also, lastly, challenges our small mindedness. Jesus interestingly points to this fact that at the end of the story, or the end of the account of the 10 lepers, He said that 10 clans, only one found this Samaritan.

And that's very interesting because Christ was living and preaching in the context of religious pride and a perceived theological superiority and a cultural insularity against Samaritans and against other Gentiles in general.

[28 : 08] And that's what Samaritans in particular. In the next chapter, chapter 18 and verse 11, He highlights that again, good teacher, the Pharisee in verse 9, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the Pharisee standing beside the tax collector and saying, God, I thank You that I am not like other men, I'm not extortioners, unjust adults, or even like this tax collector I fast twice a week.

There's a bit of humor in that, that God is giving us this amazing contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector here.

And He's highlighting this continual pride and thanklessness. They were thankful, but for the wrong reasons. They were saying, I thank You, Lord, that I'm not like other people.

That's not the kind of thankfulness He's looking for us, looking for from us. Thankful for all the wrong reasons, a complete misunderstanding of grace and of our own hearts and of the amazing gentleness and grace of God.

So the miracle here was very much a sign that the gospel and grace was to the Gentiles and not just to the Jews. The grace of God was for the outsider.

[29 : 25] The Samaritan leper, there was no one who was more on the, he was the very worst outsider religiously and culturally and socially and medically in every other way. And we praise God that this is a picture of what Jesus does by His grace for the outsider.

And you and I, when we understand grace, understand that we were outsiders. We were outsiders from God and His grace and were in darkness and in separation from Him.

And again, go back to Job just briefly, what I was reading in Job. Job understood that when he felt separated from God. He explained it in these terms. Darkness, despair, separation, darkness, darkness, darkness, night.

Outside, you know, on the outside. You know, this time of year, the lovely picture of being inside the Christmas party, the New Year's party, the lights, the warmth, the fire, being there, being part of it.

Being outside is in the darkness. And that's the picture that of our condition until we come to Jesus Christ and the Samaritan is a picture of that.

[30 : 35] We come to recognize that we've been brought inside, into the family of God and belong to Him. But we're reminded today in this last section when He speaks about the Samaritan that we have no, in our thankful hearts, we can have no place for religious pride and snobbery.

That we are any better than anybody else. That we in the church, or we in our denomination, or we in our nation are better than others. Grace simply doesn't allow that.

Theological superiority, denominational pride. There's so much to learn from other people. We are not as a denomination or as a congregation of God's chosen people.

We belong to a chosen people that are from every nation and tongue and tribe and every part of the world and globe. And we need to be aware, as Christ was speaking about, of a farac cultural insularity inside our talk as Christians, us deciding who we think should accept Christ, we're not judging those who we are to love and those who we choose to hate, who we will embrace and those that we will ostracize.

It's such a radical message, the gospel. Let's not tame it as we move into 2019. Such a great challenge. You've got so many privileges and blessings and each of us.

[32 : 03] God has been so generous and so kind to us, even in our darkest moments. He says, I will not leave you and I will not abandon you.

And let us be that gospel community, that people who have reflect as we do and as we strive to do and even when we fail to do, reflect a genuine understanding of grace through that spirit of thankful dependence.

Going back daily to Jesus and saying, thank you, Jesus. Thank you for who you are. Thank you for what you've given me. Thank you that I am saved by your grace.

Thank you for all the people around me. Thank you for all who serve. Thank you for all the different gifts and thank you for being made well, for being rescued and for a future, an unparalleled future that I can't even begin to imagine.

Amen. Let's pray. Father God, help us to live for you and serve you and love you. Help us to see the amazing clarity of the message that Jesus brought.

[33 : 13] May we not be guilty. I know I am anyway of often being thankless. Help us to come to you and ask for forgiveness for that.

And to be people who go to you first with thankful hearts before thinking of our relationships with others and their acceptance and belonging and identity in any other community or any other family context or even marriage that we would see and understand that you alone make us well.

And to know that shalom of God in our hearts and that peace of Christ that passes all understanding. Help us to know that at the end of this year and may we vow to go into a new year with a passion and a desire for you and a thankfulness that is reflective of an understanding of grace that may be new and exciting and radical for us today.

May that be the case. We know we have accepted as we come that Jesus Christ has paid the price that He has taken the cost and borne the wrath of sin and darkness and separation.

So much so that the symbol of that is given in the darkness of the cross at noon for three hours. The world is plunged into darkness as He takes on the sin that sets us free.

[34 : 41] Lord, we thank You for that today. Bless us, we pray, as we sing our parting song of thanks to God for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.