

Luke 17:11-19 (1984 NIV)
Growing in Gratefulness

11 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.
 12 As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance
 13 and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"
 14 When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.
 15 One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice.
 16 He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.
 17 Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?
 18 Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?"
 19 Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Introduction

As you prepare to end the year, what do you recall as you reflect on the past months? You probably recall good times and not so good times; up times and down times. I trust that whatever times you have been through, you can still affirm with gratefulness that the Lord is gracious and good to you and your church ... all the time. It is only when we can recall with such gratefulness to God that we can continue to move on in the coming days with hope and faith in Him.

Let me read you this story of a son writing about his mother.

My mom only had one eye. She was such an embarrassment. She cooked for students and teachers to support the family.

One day during my elementary school, my mom came to say hello to me. I was so embarrassed.

How could she do this to me? I ignored her, threw her a hateful look and ran out. The next day at school one of my classmates said, "EEEE, your mom only has one eye!"

I wanted to bury myself. I also wanted my mom to just disappear. I confronted her that day and said, "If you're going to make me a laughing stock, why don't you just die?"

My mom did not respond. I didn't even stop to think for a second about what I had said. I was full of anger. I was oblivious to her feelings.

I wanted out of that house, and have nothing to do with her. So I studied real hard, got a chance to go overseas, and eventually settled down abroad.

Then, I got married. I bought a house of my own. I had kids of my own. I was happy with my life. Then one day, my mother came to visit me. She hadn't seen me in years and she didn't even meet her grandchildren.

When she stood by the door, my children stared at her in fright, and I yelled at her for coming over uninvited. I screamed at her, "How dare you come to my house and scare my children! GET OUT OF HERE! NOW!!!"

And to this, my mother quietly answered, "Oh, I'm so sorry." She then disappeared quickly out of sight."

I wonder what your response might be as you hear the story so far. Maybe you want to shout aloud, "What an ungrateful son!" Indeed, our sermon text today reveals that ungratefulness is actually a common human tendency.

(https://www.healthnetcafe.com/community_sharing/insights_of_caregiving/my_one_eye_mum.html)

Our sermon text not only features 10 men stricken by leprosy. More importantly, it features ungratefulness as the leprosy of the human soul.

Most of us have never seen a leper. But in Bible times, it was the most feared disease. It was deadly, incurable, and contagious. The ancient people feared it so much that anyone suspected of having the disease would be banished from the community.

Dr. Luke, in recording this healing of the 10 lepers by Jesus Christ in his Gospel, stresses to us this one human weakness—people are often forgetful rather than grateful in their response to the Lord's grace in their lives.

How then do we grow in gratefulness to the Lord?

I. Growing in gratefulness begins with acknowledging our need for the Lord's grace (vv. 11-14a).

In the Old Testament, the person diagnosed with leprosy would be banished from society. As the leper passed by, he uttered the mournful words, "Unclean! Unclean!" This was required by the Law so that others would be alerted to stay clear from him (Lev. 13:45-46).

We come to Luke 17:11-12 where it says that as Jesus was traveling along the border of Samaria and Galilee, he met a group of lepers. It is a remote area, precisely where you would expect to find a leper colony.

Good Jews would avoid Samaria at all cost. The reason goes back hundreds of years to the Assyrian Captivity which began in 722 B.C. Samaritans were the offspring of some of the Jews who had intermarried with the Assyrians. They had become, in the eyes of the Jews, impure half-breeds. The Jews hated the Samaritans, and the Samaritans responded in the same way.

And it is here, on the frontier between Galilee and Samaria, in the "buffer zone" between the Jews and the Samaritans, that Jesus meets 10 lepers.

Verses 12-13 say: "As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us!'"

By crying out for pity (or "mercy" as in some other versions), these men were acknowledging that they did not deserve healing. They weren't claiming, "We're lepers, but we're good lepers. We think we're worthy of being healed."

Here is a colony of lepers joined by their common misfortune and misery. As Jesus enters the village, these men stand afar crying out to him for pity. No doubt they had heard the news going around—"Jesus can heal lepers." No doubt they discussed it and then discounted it. Even if Jesus could do such a thing, what were the chances that He would ever come to their God-forsaken village? But now the word spreads—"Jesus is here!"

There they stand, 10 lepers crying out to Jesus, "Have pity! Have pity!" For too long, they had experienced too little pity and too much condemnation. They were acknowledging aloud their need for the Lord's grace to work in their lives.

When Jesus saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests" (v. 14). What a seemingly irrelevant response from the Lord! It is like you go consult a doctor because you have a contagious disease, and he said to you, "Show yourself to your boss." You might think that Jesus was simply brushing them away. You might even conclude that He didn't intend to heal them at all. You might infer that Jesus meant to impress upon them the

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hopelessness of their condition. But all these inferences are incorrect. As a matter of fact, Jesus fully intended to heal them, and He intended to do it in keeping with the demands of the Law of Moses. Leviticus 14 clearly states that the priest must authenticate any “cure” from leprosy. If Jesus hadn’t sent the lepers to the priest, no one would have believed that the lepers were healed.

If these lepers had thought, “We may be sick but we also have our pride, and we’re not all that bad,” they wouldn’t have cried out to Jesus for pity. They knew that they were goners unless the Lord in His grace had pity on them. It is important that we first acknowledge our state of unwholesomeness if we are to work towards being wholesome. For the Lord’s grace to work in our lives, we must first acknowledge our need for His grace.

The Bible often speaks of being healed in terms of being made wholesome. Sometimes a person may be a wholesome person even though there is a physical illness or disability. Sometimes the thing that needs to be healed is not a physical condition, but a damaged emotion or relationship.

There is one tendency in us that can block the Lord’s grace from working in our lives as a person or as a church. It is the tendency to stubbornly deny our weakness or limitation. We often worry about what others think of us when we show our weakness. This weakness may be a limitation that requires the Lord’s grace and strength to enable you to overcome. It may be a physical limitation, a talent limitation, or an intellectual limitation. We tend to deny our weaknesses by resenting them, defending them, excusing them, or hiding them. But if we deny our weakness by resenting it or hiding it, then we can prevent God from using us the way He desires; we can hinder God’s grace working in and through us.

God doesn’t want to just use our strengths for good. He also wants to use our weaknesses for His glory. The Bible is filled with examples of how God uses imperfect, ordinary people to do extraordinary things in spite of their weaknesses.

God is never limited by our limitations. Instead, He will use us if we allow Him to work through our weaknesses. For that to happen, we must put aside our stubborn denial by:

- Admitting our weaknesses. Stop pretending to have it all together, and be honest about ourselves.
- Sharing our struggles honestly. The more we take off our masks and share our struggles, the more God will be able to use us to help one another in the Body of Jesus Christ.

When we admit and share our weaknesses or struggles with discernment and discretion, it can encourage fellowship with others. We are far more likely to be compassionate and considerate of the weaknesses of others when we own up to our own.

Of course, this can be risky. However, I believe the more honest we are, the more we will receive grace from the Lord and graciousness from others.

If all people see are our strengths, they can get discouraged and think, "Well, good for him, but I'll never be able to do that." But when they see God using us in spite of our weaknesses, it can encourage them to think, "If God can use that rascal John Yuen, maybe God can use me too!"

At some point in our lives we must decide whether we want to impress or influence people. We can impress people from a distance. But we must get close if we want to influence them. And when we do that, they will see our flaws close-up. That's okay. The most essential quality is not perfection, but authenticity. How do you show authenticity? Not by pretending to be perfect, but by being honest about who you really are, including your imperfections.

Our stubborn denial of our weakness or limitation can block the Lord's grace working in and through us individually and as a church.

The 10 lepers stood afar from Jesus. But they did not hide from Him. Instead, they cried out loudly and unashamedly to Him for pity. And that opened the way for the Lord's grace to work in their lives.

This sense of need for God's grace to work in our lives leads to a second need.

II. For the Lord's grace to work in our lives, we need to walk in obedient faith (v. 14b).

The second part of v. 14 says that "as they went they were cleansed". The 10 lepers were healed as they went. Not before. Not after. That means when they left to go to the priest, they still had leprosy.

How do you suppose they felt when Jesus said, "Go show yourselves to the priest?" Earlier in Luke 5:13, Jesus first healed a leper and then instructed him to go and show himself to the priest. But here, without any evidence of healing, Jesus commands these 10 lepers to go and show themselves to the priests.

They were still lepers. They didn't have anything to show that the priest would want to see. In fact, the last thing the priest wanted to see was 10 wretched lepers. But off they went. It was a test of obedient faith to go without any immediate evidence of healing.

They were healed as they went. Not before. Not after. But in the act of going they were healed. Why? Because it was the act of going that was the act of obedient faith. It didn't matter how they felt about it. God honoured their going in spite of the doubts that they might have.

When Jesus said, "Go show the priest," he was really saying, "Act as if you are already healed." So many times we pray and pray, and nothing seems to happen. But when our faith, tentative it may be, finally moves us to action, God will honour it and the answer will begin to come.

Perhaps, many are trapped by passive faith. It's the belief that trusting God means letting Him do it all. It is like someone praying, "Lord, help me to be fit," but he refuses to take and make time to exercise. Passive faith uses God as an excuse to do nothing. Trusting God does not equal doing nothing. Remember, the 10 lepers were healed as they went.

When Hudson Taylor went to China, he made the voyage on a sailing vessel. As it neared the channel between the southern Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, the missionary heard an urgent knock on his room door. He opened it, and there stood the captain of the ship.

"Mr. Taylor," he said, "we have no wind. We are drifting toward an island where the people are heathen, and I fear they are cannibals."

"What can I do?" asked Taylor.

"I understand that you believe in God. I want you to pray for wind."

"All right, Captain, I will, but you must set the sail."

"Why that's ridiculous! There's not even the slightest breeze. My sailors will think I'm crazy."

But finally, because of Taylor's insistence, he agreed. Forty-five minutes later, he returned and found the missionary still on his knees.

"You can stop praying now," said the captain. "We've got more wind than we know what to do with!"

Walking in obedient faith is something like this. When we pray for God to work in grace, we must walk in faith at the same time. But often, to act in obedient faith can make us look crazy or foolish. And we don't like that. The biggest mountain we face is our own reluctance to act in obedient faith. And when we fail to walk in obedient faith, we miss seeing the Lord's grace and power working in and through us.

(<https://bible.org/series/2%27%29.?page=848>)

Do you as a person and a church want to do greater things for the Lord in the coming days? If the answer is “yes”, then heed the call of the Lord to walk in obedient faith.

Oftentimes, our faith moves mountains only when our faith first moves us.

So the 10 lepers were healed. It is a miracle, but it is not the end of the story. In fact, that’s not even the heart of the story. A greater blessing is at hand—i.e. divine forgiveness and not just physical healing.

There’s a common reason why we who have tasted the Lord’s grace can still miss out on His greater blessing.

III. We miss out on the Lord’s greater blessing because we are more forgetful than grateful towards Him (vv. 15-19).

Verses 15-16 say: “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.”

All the lepers received the blessing of healed bodies. But it is only to the one thankful leper who returned that our Lord proclaimed, “Your faith has made you well” (literally, v. 19 means “Your faith has saved you”). This one leper received much more than physical healing. He was also blessed with divine forgiveness that led to the salvation of his soul.

In the same way, it is possible to receive a blessing from God in answer to prayer, such as healing from a serious illness, and yet to fall short of a greater blessing. Some of us may have seen this in our family members or friends who are not believers in Jesus Christ. They are most willing to seek Jesus Christ for healing of a sickness. But once they are healed, they become hesitant or resistant to seek salvation in Him.

Ten were healed and only one came back to Jesus. He gave praise to God, fell face-down at Jesus’ feet, and gave thanks to Him. In ancient times, such acts were a posture of worship. This leper’s gratefulness opened his eyes to see Jesus as He is—He’s not merely a miracle worker; He’s the Messiah to be worshipped!

When Luke adds in v. 16, “He was a Samaritan,” he is writing for shock effect. Remember, Jesus was a Jew and the Jews viewed Samaritans as impure half-breeds. The one who came back to look for Jesus was not only a leper, but he was also a Samaritan. To the Jews, he was from the wrong race, he had the wrong religion, and he had the worst possible disease. In religious

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matters, what he knew was mostly wrong! But he knew Jesus had healed him, and he knew enough to be grateful to the Lord. The fact that this man was a Samaritan shows that the way to divine forgiveness is open to all who will worship Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Luke doesn't say so directly, but I believe he implies that the other nine were Jews. If that's so, then this story really cautions us that those who were expected to express gratitude and faith never did so. And the one who was not expected to express gratitude and faith in Jesus Christ actually did. Throughout their history, the Jews had tasted much of God's grace and goodness. Their great spiritual heritage should have made them more sensitive and responsive to Jesus as their promised Messiah. But they remained spiritually blind and hardened like the nine Jewish lepers. This implies that Christians can be spiritually indifferent towards the Lord as well.

This pictures life as it really is—it is a picture of prevalent faithless ingratitude. Nine out of 10 people will probably be more forgetful than grateful to the Lord's grace and goodness in their lives. There are far more who are willing to pray in a time of need than to pursue God once He has met that need for them.

All 10 lepers were healed. But the Samaritan was healed and forgiven. And that's what Jesus means when He says to this healed man in v. 19, "Your faith has made you well." This one did not miss out on the greater blessing because he did not follow the crowd; he did not do what the other nine were doing.

But sadly, ungratefulness is the leprosy of the human soul. Ten men were healed that day, but only one came back to give thanks. Are you standing with the nine or with the one?

The secret of a grateful heart is a conscious choice not to forget what the Lord has done for us.

Conclusion

You remember the story that I have shared at the beginning? Here's what the son continued to write about his mother.

One day, a letter regarding a school reunion came to my house. So I made a trip back to the land I left behind so many years ago. After the reunion, I went to my old house just out of curiosity.

The neighbours said that my mom had died. I did not shed a single tear. They handed me a letter that she had wanted me to have. She wrote:

“My dearest son,

I think of you all the time. I’m sorry that I came to your house and scared your children.

I was so glad when I heard you were coming for the reunion. But I may not be able to even get out of bed to see you. I’m sorry that I was a constant embarrassment to you when you were growing up.

You see ... when you were very young, you got into an accident, and damaged your eye. As a mother, I couldn’t stand watching you having to grow up blind in one eye. So I gave you one of mine.

I was so proud of my son who was seeing a whole new world with that eye.

With all my love to you,

Your mother.”

In spite of the ungratefulness of her son, the mother still loved him to the very end. In an earthly and limited way, her love gives us a glimpse of the Lord’s perfect and unconditional love for His people.

The Lord does not need the gratefulness of His people in order to be a better God. But the people of God need to be grateful to Him in order to be better persons in Him; to be better worshippers of Him.

You have tasted much of the Lord’s grace and goodness in both up and down times. You can look forward to even greater things from Him and doing greater things for Him if you continue to grow in gratefulness towards Him. So, today and in the coming days ...

- Watch what God is doing in your midst.
- Count and record your blessings, big or small.
- Be grateful and thankful in all things for then the joy of the Lord will be your strength.

Let’s seek God to help us grow in gratefulness so that we can always be thankful, hopeful, and faithful in all that He has called us to be and to do as His worshippers, workers, and witnesses. Amen!