

“One Out Of Ten Or Nine Out Of Ten?”

Text: Luke 17:11-19

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Thanksgiving Sunday 2008

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Theme: **God’s Grace Deserves Our Gratitude.**

Introduction

How are you going to celebrate Thanksgiving? Since we don’t have time for all of us to answer, let me read you the plans one lady announced to her extended family: “Martha Stewart will not be dining with us this Thanksgiving. Since Ms. Stewart won’t be coming, I’ve made a few small changes: our sidewalk will not be lined with homemade, paper bag luminaries. After a trial run, it was decided that no matter how cleverly done, rows of flaming lunch sacks do not have the desired welcoming effect.

“Once inside, our guests will note the entry hall is not decorated with swags of Indian corn and fall foliage. I’ve gotten the kids involved in the decorating by having them track in colorful autumn leaves from the front yard. The mud was their idea.

“We will not use fancy china or crystal goblets. If possible, we will use dishes that match and everyone will get a fork. Since this is Thanksgiving, we will refrain from using the plastic Peter Rabbit plate and the Santa napkins.

“We toyed with the idea of ringing a dainty silver bell to announce the start of our feast. In the end, we chose to keep our traditional method. When the smoke alarm sounds, please gather around the table and sit where you like. In the spirit of harmony, we will ask the children to sit at a separate table. In a separate room. Next door.

“Now, I know you have all seen pictures of one person carving a turkey in front of a crowd of appreciative onlookers. This will not happen at our dinner. For safety reasons, the turkey will be carved in a private ceremony. I have an electric knife. The turkey is unarmed. It stands to reason that I will eventually win. When I do, we will eat.

“Let me remind my young diners that ‘passing the rolls’ is not a football play. Nor is it a request to bean your sister in the head with warm tasty bread.

“No, Martha Stewart will not be dining with us this Thanksgiving. She probably won’t come next year either. I am thankful.”

There are many different ways to celebrate Thanksgiving. All of them should include *giving thanks*. In the church we often look to the Bible and life to review things for which we should be thankful, and why we should be thankful. That is as it should be.

Today I want us to take it a step farther, to think not just about giving thanks, but *being* thankful; not just the *acts* of thankfulness, but the character of *thankfulness*. We will do that from the experience of the ten men, the ten lepers that we read about in Luke chapter 17. As you will recall from the account, the ten lepers eventually broke into two groups: a group

of nine and a *group* of one; one group characterized by ingratitude, the other by gratitude to God. And so that question I mentioned at the start of the service:

Which group are you in?
Are you in the group of one out of ten,
or the group of nine out of ten?

The central, core truth for us today is that *God's grace deserves our gratitude.*

The Grace Of God To The Ten Lepers.

We clearly see here the lepers' need of God's grace and His grace to them. Every person is born as a sinner and sins. So, everyone needs God's grace. But these ten men had a special, painful and heart-wrenching need because they had leprosy. We get our English words leper and leprosy from the term Luke used here. It was a broad term and so the specific disease these men had is not clear. What we call leprosy, or Hansen's disease, certainly can be included in the Old and New Testament descriptions. But the Old Testament term also included other diseases as well as mold and mildew on the walls of buildings and on clothing and other fabrics.

The Old Testament regulations dealing with *leprosy* were set out in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14. The diseases rendered the sick person ceremonially unclean—that is, they could not come to join in worship before God until they were clean, or cured. Also, others could not have direct contact with them or they too would become ceremonially unclean. As a result, lepers lived separately and were to shout out the warning, "*Unclean! Unclean!*" when anyone was close by (*cf.* Leviticus 13:45-46). The priests were the *health inspectors* for these cases. They would declare the sick person unclean and only they could later declare that person to be cured, and so able to reenter normal life.

But some of these diseases were incurable, leaving the victims as poor outcasts for the rest of their lives. Sometimes they banded together, as this group of ten did. The serious personal and social ramifications are evidenced here as this group included one Samaritan. Their disease and desperation erased the longstanding prejudice and hatred between Jews and Samaritans. Like the untouchables of other societies, these ten men were locked into a hopeless, dead-end life. Only God's grace could free them from it.

Luke tells us Jesus was passing by these men. He gave them a gift of grace they could only have dreamed about before He came. The men saw Jesus coming by and "...raised their voices, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'" Their call tells us they knew who Jesus was. Perhaps they had seen Him minister at an earlier time.

Their request was simple, "Have mercy on us!" They were asking for mercy, compassion, pity. Were they asking for food, money, to be healed? The manner of their request, "Jesus, Master," might indicate they were asking for more than food or money. But Luke doesn't give us enough information to reach a clear determination. Even Jesus' response in verse 14

doesn't prove they were asking to be healed, in that He frequently did not answer the specific question posed, but moved to a deeper issue.

How did Jesus respond? He did not ask for any details about their disease or desires. Nor did He lay hands on them, or even approach them. Luke tells us, 14, "When He saw them, He said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.'" He didn't say, "*You are healed!* Go and show yourselves to the priests." But they knew what Jesus meant. There was only one reason they would have the priests examine themselves, that is, to verify they no longer had leprosy. Luke gives us some clarification, as verse 14 continues, "*and as they were going, they were cleansed.*" They were not healed as the words left Jesus' mouth, but as their feet started moving toward the priests.

What great grace! There was nothing in these men that merited being healed. Nor did Jesus love them more than the many others suffering with this disease whom He did not heal. It was all grace.

Yet, that can raise questions.

- "Why them and not other lepers?"
- "Why that person and not my friend or family member?"
- "Why him or her and not me?"
- And even the protest, "It's not fair!"

You've been there. I've been there. I wish I had a nice, simple, easy answer for all of us. I don't. What I know is that God tells us in His word...

- "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exodus 33:19). It is His sovereign choice, and in that there is no injustice or partiality (*cf.* Rom 9:14-16).
- He also tells us that nothing can separate His children from Him and His love (*cf.* Romans 8:31-39) and that His will for us is good, acceptable and perfect (*cf.* Romans 12:2).
- He has told us that people of faith have been and are both martyred and miraculously rescued from death (*cf.* Hebrews 11:32-40).
- God repeatedly emphasizes in Scripture that the goal and end of all people, things and events is not primarily our happiness or even holiness, not our fulfillment or success, but His own glory (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 10:31; Isaiah 42:8, 48:11, etc.).
- Yes, it is easy to rejoice in God's grace to the ten lepers. And, yes, it is agonizing to work through not seeing the acts of God's grace we want to see in our difficult, troubling and tragic times.

Let's move to the division of the ten, a division not by ethnicity, health or wealth, but by character. We begin with the nine and their ingratitude.

The Ingratitude Of The Nine Lepers.

The nine began with a positive response. Jesus answered their plea for compassion by telling them to go and show themselves to the priests. They did not ask any questions, but began walking. They heard, believed, and obeyed before they were healed.

Don't rush by this just because it is part of an account in the Bible. Think about their response. Most people most of the time then and now, them and us, tend to change the order. We want to *see* first, then we will believe and obey. But these men set out to find some priests, and then they were healed. If the account ended with verse 14, we might have a different view of the nine. But the account goes on.

Luke shows us that the nine believed and obeyed, but their focus was on the blessing or, as we often say, on the gift rather than the giver. They did not stop or, apparently, even think of detouring a few steps to thank Jesus. When the one did go to Jesus, Jesus asked him where the other nine were? Look at the telling phrase in verse 18, "Was no one found who returned *to give glory to God ...?*" Jesus concern here was what it always is—that everyone and everything would give glory to God. As Jesus faced the cross He prayed, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, *that the Son may glorify You ...*" (John 17:1).

We could say the nine were thankful that they were healed, that they could go to the priests and be declared clean, that they could reenter normal life. They were thankful for God's grace, the gift. And, they did exactly what Jesus told them to do.

But, they were not truly or fully thankful in that they did not have a character of thankfulness to God who showered them with this grace. If the nine had a thankful character they would have glorified God with the one. They are not alone in that. This group of nine represents the majority of people in their day and ours.

I suspect that most Canadians today and tomorrow will enjoy the food, family time and football. Some will even share with each other some of the things for which they are thankful, including health, freedom, family, food and shelter, friends, God's love and salvation, a job, and their church.

As good and important as all of this is, how many of us fit into the group of the nine, focused on the gifts, and not the giver? How many of us do not have a character of gratitude to God for who He is and what His grace to us deserves from us. *God's grace deserves our gratitude.* And so, let's turn our attention to ...

The Gratitude Of The One Leper.

His response to Jesus also began with hearing, believing and obeying. He and the group of nine were united on that. This response of the ten does not indicate the presence or absence of true faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior. And God doesn't pull back the curtain to reveal the human dimension of why the ten believed and obeyed Jesus. Perhaps

it was desperation? “It’s worth a shot” kind of thinking? Or, because they had heard of or seen Jesus heal others? We don’t know these factors, but we know from Scripture that faith in what God says is a gift from Him.

But at this point the Samaritan broke away from the group of nine. While the nine were focused on their blessing, he was focused on the source of his blessing. Go to verse 15,

“... when he saw that he had been healed, [he] turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at [Jesus’] feet, giving thanks to Him.”

Notice a few things here. This leper gave glory to God. He did it publically, “with a loud vice.” The ten “raised their voices”, or shouted their plea for help to Jesus (13). This leper knew it was God who had healed him, and His thanksgiving was as public and loud as his request. Going to Jesus required a bit of time and a short detour. Doing this demonstrated his character of thankfulness. I’m sure he was just as excited and anxious to be declared healed and clean as the other nine—but his priority, his focus was on expressing his thankfulness to God first.

And when he came to Jesus, he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet. This shows his complete humility before Jesus. He also was telling Jesus and anyone else who saw this that Jesus was the *Master* (13), was worthy of his respect. This man turned back, thanked God and bowed before Jesus because he was a truly thankful person, because he was focused on the source of his blessing above the blessing itself.

Question: How did he become a thankful person? How did he develop the character trait of being thankful to God? After all, life had not been kind to him. The account does not tell us. There are many books and articles about the importance and building of good character. Our starting point, and our measuring rod must be God’s Word. Let’s note two passages that touch on this with respect to ourselves.

Turn to Romans chapter 5. The chapter opens with Paul summarizing some of the blessings of being a child of God, of being righteous before God. Let’s pick it up at verse 3,

“... we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” (3-5)

Zero in on two connected steps here: perseverance and proven character. Perseverance leads to proven, demonstrated, character. To develop any character trait requires perseverance ... to repeat, to keep doing the same thing over a period of time despite different events

Children develop character traits from their parents, friends and others which they see and follow day after day. If I thank God for who He is and His blessings once a year at Thanksgiving, I will not build a character of being thankful. Even if I thank God now and

then, at special or exceptional times, I will still not be building the character trait of thankfulness. The power to change and build character that pleases God is the Holy Spirit, who Paul tells us in these verses, “was given to us,” who lives within us.

That brings us to the second passage, 2 Corinthians 3. Here Paul is talking about ministry that results in changed lives and the changes that take place. At the end of the chapter, in verse 18, building on a contrast with Moses from the Old Testament, he writes,

“... we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

Again, the agent, the power to change and develop character for the believer is the Holy Spirit. The pattern He is using is the character of Jesus. As we look to God in the light of His Word and obey Him, He transforms our character to be like that of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion.

Yes, God's grace deserves our gratitude.

And so we come back to our question of the day one more time:

Which group are you in?
Are you in the *group* of one out of ten,
or the group of nine out of ten?

As you think about and answer this question in the next few quiet moments, thank God.

- that He is eternal, unchanging, holy, loving and gracious;
- that He has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in Christ.
- that He bless you today and every day.

Ask Him to keep on building thankfulness within you and using that to reveal Himself to others as they see clearly that you *are* in the group of one out of ten.

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