

REMEMBERING TO GIVE THANKS (Christian Character for Challenging Times)

Luke 17:11-19 - November 20, 2020 - Immanuel UMC - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

It is very common to compile a wish list at Christmas, or to draw up a list of resolutions for New Years. But there is another list we often overlook - a Thanksgiving Day list of all the things for which we are thankful. Someone sent me an email with a partial list compiled by some stay at home moms - or what I prefer to call homemakers. They were thankful...

- *"For automatic dishwashers because they make it possible for us to get out of the kitchen before the family comes back in for their after-dinner snacks."*
- *"For husbands who attack small repair jobs around the house because they usually make the problems big enough so that you feel better about calling in the professionals."*
- *"For children who put away their things & clean up after themselves. They're such a joy you hate to see them go home to their own parents."*
- *"For teenagers because they give parents an opportunity to learn a second language."*
- *"For Smoke alarms because they let you know when the turkey's done."*

I love Thanksgiving! It is one of my favorite holidays. I love getting together with family and friends, eating an enormous meal featuring some of my favorite foods, and watching football on TV, and traveling to visit family, and getting a short break before the fun but busy Advent and Christmas seasons. It is usually one of the most wonderful times of the year.

Unfortunately, like many or even most people, my Thanksgiving celebration probably won't look like it has in the past. Like many others, we have been prayerfully considering what is best for our beloved family members - including the impact on body, mind, and spirit - which leads to some hard choices. While there will surely be new and unexpected blessings - whatever people choose to do - I think it's fair to say, that most of us would prefer it to be more like it has been before. This year, I've lost track of how many times I've lamented and said, *"Well here comes another opportunity for a deeper experience of grief."* You get it - right?

When people ask "How are you doing?" I often find myself saying, *"I'm hanging in there,"* or *"Under the circumstances we're doing okay."* We're all "under" some heavy circumstances. There is more to the story. It would also be true to say, *"I'm doing better than I deserve,"* or *"I'm very blessed"* but there are other truths as well. We don't need to deny our grief, or pretend that we're happy about things when we're not. It is fair to admit that we're all just trying to make the most out of the bad situations and options we're facing in these strange days.

Today we conclude our sermon series, "Christian Character for challenging Times." I want to end by talking about one of the most important character traits we need - **thankfulness.**

The Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to write, *"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* (1 Thess. 5:16-18). *"Give thanks in all circumstances..."* This is a tough verse for many people, who are "under the circumstances" in various challenging ways - because some circumstances are just bad.

I don't think this means that we have to give thanks for bad things - I think the use of the word "in" instead of "for" here is very important. We give thanks IN bad times, not for the bad times. I also don't think this text means that God is the cause of all the bad things that happen to us. More correctly we should say God allows some of these things to happen in our lives. That is the price God is willing to pay for people to enjoy free will and the consequences - good and bad - that come with free-will for everyone impacted by our choices.

Romans 8:28 it says, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* I have quoted this text many times in the series - and over the past 7 or 8 months - because it is one that I lean on in each & every challenging time of life. I believe God is working IN all things for our good - even now.

I also believe that the Lord allows some bitter experiences to come into our lives, but God still uses them for our good. For example, God might use them to give us a wake up call, or to make us holy, or to soften our hearts and give us empathy, or to make us reevaluate our priorities, or to recommit ourselves to God, or to save us from greater harm.

What we must claim, by faith, is the vision to see that God is still working for good in our lives in spite of, and even through the difficult circumstances of our lives. Often, in hindsight, we can see how God has been working, but until we can see it for ourselves - we must walk by faith. God is working for good in all things. Some of the "all things" can be very painful.

Roman 8:38 mentions real evils. It says, *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."* It talks about death, demons, great powers against us and the whole scope and weight of time. All these challenges are real but they cannot overcome God's love for us and God's good plan for our futures.

In the hard times of life, you need to get to a place in your heart and mind where you can say, *"God I don't yet understand why this is happening in my life - but I trust in You because I know you are a good God who wants to give good gifts to your children - and I thank you."*

Why does God Command us to Give Thanks in every circumstance?

First, God wants us to give thanks in the good times because thanksgiving promotes God's glory and develops humility in us. We all have a tendency to usurp the credit for the good things God does. We must give thanks in the good times because it reminds us that every good and perfect gift is from above. We call a child that takes and takes without giving thanks to those who give, a spoiled child, and they are, or at least they are in danger of becoming spoiled.

We should give thanks in the good times because giving thanks makes us appreciate what we've been given. A person who is not grateful doesn't appreciate the richness of life.

When we take the time to count our blessings, when we make it a point to focus on the wonderful things we've been given, we begin to appreciate life more which points us to God.

Second, God wants us to give thanks in the difficult times because it's an act of faith.

When things are tough, it takes faith to thank God for our circumstances. We must really believe that God has a plan we do not see. We must really believe that His wisdom is beyond our own. We must really believe that God is still working for our good. We must really believe that God will bring us through to a better place - whether in the life or the next. We can't live without hope and faith is what gives us hope for tomorrow.

God wants us to give thanks in the difficult times because He wants us to learn to walk by faith and not by sight. We can't always understand what happens in life. If we depend on our senses, or feeling then life will be like a roller coaster. If we learn to depend on God, and trust in Him no matter what, then life will be steady and peaceful even in the confusing times.

Do you find it hard to be thankful sometimes? I think most people do. But we need to know this - we cannot afford to forget - we must remember to stop and give thanks to God.

In our story from Luke Jesus cleansed ten lepers. All received the same great blessing, but only one returned to thank the Healer, Jesus. So Jesus asked a question, with a ring of disappointment to it, *"Where are the other nine?"* In other words, ***"Why no Thanksgiving?"***

The passage tells us that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and just outside of the region of Samaria. Jesus wasn't on his way to Jerusalem just for another visit. He knew what awaited him there and it wasn't the welcome wagon. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to take up the cross so He could die as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of all people.

On the way to his destiny Jesus encountered these ten sons of sorrow; these ten men with leprosy. This cried out together, ***"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us?"*** They asked for "mercy" - in other words, ***"our life in your hands Jesus – do for us whatever you will."***

Jesus had pity on them. Luke reports, *"When he saw them . . ."* Do you know what they must have looked like? Leviticus 13:45-46 gives a pretty good description. Listen:

"Those persons who have the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of their head be disheveled; and they shall cover their mouth and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." As long as the disease lasts, they will be ceremonially unclean and must live in isolation outside the camp."

These ten lepers were like the walking dead. Whether you were talking physically, spiritually, or socially. Because of their illness, they were regarded as dangerous and disgusting - people to be shunned. They were regarded as unclean, as people beyond help. Most everyone would have written them off long ago as lost causes - not worth caring about.

That's what everybody else saw. But Jesus saw something else. He saw their pain, not only physical pain but also the pain of being separated from their families, their friends, their neighbors. He saw the pain of being shunned by everyone. He saw their loneliness.

"When [Jesus] saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.'

Only the priests could officially pronounce them "cured," so that they could be accepted back into their families and back into the religious community. Without all that they could never be fully healed or even fully alive. The text goes on to say, ***"as they went, they were cleansed."***

How did these ten men respond to this gift from Jesus? We only know about one of them - the Samaritan - the one you would least expect. The text says goes on to say that only one grateful leper *"came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself to the ground at Jesus' feet and thanked him."* Ten were healed physically but **only one** returned to give thanks.

The text doesn't tell us the rest of the story. So I think that leaves us to generally consider why it is important to remember and why we ought to turn back to God and give thanks.

I think it has always been hard for some people to stop and give thanks. In ages past, not only our pastors but also our politicians would remind us of the need for giving thanks to God.

It is only in recent years that what was once common has become rare or even considered wrong. For the first 150+ years after our nation was formed, and for a hundred + years before that - it was very common for leaders and politicians in this country to be very public about their faith in Christ - in fact they spoke about the Lord often in the course of their work - in both state and local government, in congress, and from the office of the president.

A couple of my favorite examples come from President Abraham Lincoln. In March of 1863 Lincoln called for establishing a national day of thanksgiving, prayer, and fasting.

This tradition of setting aside a day for Thanksgiving was already well established - but he wanted to make it a more official tradition because he believed the American people might forget to turn back and thank the Lord. Listen to what he said before the US Senate (*I can't imagine a politician with the courage to do something like this now*). He said,

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. **But we have forgotten God.**

We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthen us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then to humble ourselves... and to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

In his official Thanksgiving Proclamation later that year, President Abraham Lincoln talked about the many blessings common in our national life - and then he said this,

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.

Thanksgiving is a great reminder - it reminds us both of the need to express our thanks and to whom we should be grateful. But why do we need to be reminded?

Why do we so often fail to give thanks? I can think of some possible reasons:

One answer could be a lack of faith in God. The nine lepers may not have come back because they didn't recognize or acknowledge the power or Lordship of Christ. They thought it was a fluke or coincidence - they got lucky - or at least they didn't want to give Jesus credit for it.

When you give thanks, you give thanks to someone. The lepers who were healed were all happy to be healed. Yet only one recognized that he should stop and give thanks to Christ for his healing. He stopped to remember the source. Many in our land are happy about what they have - but too often they fail to recognize the One who made it all possible. God is the One from whom ALL blessing flow. Apart from God - none of our blessings would be possible.

Colonial merchant Timothy Dexter once said, *"an ungrateful man is like a hog under some tree eating acorns, but never looking up to see where they come from."*

I am sad to say that can see a lack of gratitude all around us. Many people, particularly in our nation, say, *"No one gave me anything - I earned everything I have."* We love the myth of the "self-made" man or woman - the person who raises themselves up by their own bootstraps to succeed against all odds all by themselves. The problem is that no such person exists.

We ought to reward and respect people who take responsibility for themselves and work hard to courageously make the most out of difficult circumstances. That is very good.

But the fact remains - none of us can prosper in this world without the help of others.

At the very least we should remember that we didn't bring ourselves into the world, we didn't change our own diapers as babies, and we didn't teach ourselves to walk, or eat, or use the toilet, or tie our shoes or even to read and write. Every person owes their success to the contributions of others. Above all else - we must remember that the greatest contribution to our well-being, to our life, liberty, and our ability to pursue happiness - comes from God.

Sometimes a lack of thankfulness may spring from our pride. We don't give thanks because deep down we feel that we have earned or otherwise deserve the good things that we have received. We don't stop to take the time to thank anyone, not even God. Many people fail to give thanks because they don't acknowledge or recognize the work of God in their lives.

Another reason we might fail to praise God or give him thanks is because we underestimate the role of grace in our lives. Once again, it is a form of pride, and a prideful heart is never a thankful heart. Humility and thanks always go hand in hand.

However, when we have caught the biblical vision of our own sinfulness, our unworthiness for any of the things which we have received, then we begin to lift up our voice in praise and thanks to God. Grace is the undeserved, unearned favor and blessing of God.

The truth is none of us would have anything good in our lives had not God chosen to be gracious to us. From the fact that we were born in the first place, to the good earth under our feet, and the all the opportunities and the love of people around us - it is all a gift of grace.

Another reason we might fail to thank God is because we are so often preoccupied with the bad things in our lives. We can't see the good because it is buried under a mound of painful experiences, disappointments, sickness, heartache or loss. Maybe some of the lepers didn't come back to give thanks because they were preoccupied with their sense of loss - the lost years, the lost loved ones, the lost status, and then sense of loss they still had to cope with.

Maybe they needed some time to change their focus, from obsessing about their loss or hardships, to see instead the opportunities and the blessing they already had, and the new ones that Jesus was now making possible. I will come back to counting our blessings later.

I want to share a few ways that thanksgiving - or gratitude - can help us grow spiritually.

Giving thanks reminds us of the created order. God is in control, not us. We have to do our part but it is God who has made all that we have and all that is possible. Giving thanks keeps our perspective on God and not us. It's so easy to turn that view of life around. That's the biggest temptation of life, looking only through our eyes and defining everything by our wants and desires and achievements. Giving thanks helps us stay focused on God.

Giving also thanks leaves no room for discouragement. I once read a legend about a man who found the barn where Satan kept his evil seeds ready to be planted in the human heart.

He found that the seeds of discouragement were the most numerous and Satan said they were his best seeds because they could grow almost anywhere. The man noticed that Satan said “*almost anywhere*” so he questioned him about it. Satan reluctantly admitted that there was only one place in which he could never get the seeds of discouragement to grow. “*And where is that?*” asked the man. Satan replied sadly, “*In the heart of a grateful person.*” Gratitude is a cure and a prevention against discouragement.

Giving thanks is also powerful way of experiencing God's love. You've heard the old saying, “*You need to count your blessings,*” well that's a great idea. Because otherwise we may not realize how much we have to be thankful about and how much God loves us. So count your blessings - I mean that literally, we need to write out all of those things and people and activities that make our life good, more loving, more meaningful, more fun; that make our life worth living. Write them out and then spend time giving thanks to God for each one of them.

Giving thanks is also a powerful way of expressing our love for God. We are called to have the same thankful spirit of love which the Samaritan leper had. Unlike the leper, we cannot physically run and fall down at the feet of Jesus to offer thanks – but in a real way we can do that in praise and worship – and giving praise and thanks to God is perhaps the most important part of our worship, but there is something more we must do beyond worship. Jesus taught that, after worship, the next best way to show our love for God is to show our love to one another - and to express our gratitude for the way we are blessed by others.

When we want to offer thanks to God - we should look up in prayer and praise – but then we should look around for those good people that God has placed in our lives to bless us and we can say thanks to God by saying thanks to them for the blessing they are to us.

I read about a poor man who died deep in the hills of Eastern Kentucky. His wife buried him, and with the help of neighbors she placed a large boulder to serve as a headstone for his grave. Into that headstone she crudely chiseled these words, “*He Always Appreciated.*”

I am not sure that one could hope for a better epithet, better words by which to be remembered, “*He Always Appreciated.*” It is my prayer that someone, at the end of our days on this earth, would say the same thing about each of us.

Let us to be a people who remember to stop and to give thanks where thanks is due.