

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Return to the Source

Luke 17:11-19

I want to begin this sermon where I ended my last sermon, before I stepped out of the picture and began my sabbatical. Four months ago, I stood here and said thank you for your love and generosity expressed in the gift of a sabbatical. And today, I come back to this same spot to voice my gratitude again. I say thanks to God and to you for a fruitful and meaningful period of rest, reading, reflection and renewal. Lots of things happened in my life and in the life of our family during that time. And I know that lots of things happened here in the life of our congregation during that time. We'll have opportunities to talk more in one-on-one conversations and in small groups about what the sabbatical was like, for me and for our church. But at this point, my primary message to you is gratitude.

You may remember that I closed out my July 16 sermon with a story about a church that was preparing for its pastor's departure on sabbatical. During the worship service, various symbols of leadership and ministry were given to the associate pastor, the church board, lay staff, and others who would be leading the congregation while the pastor was away. The pastor's name was Bud, so one of the symbols given to the staff was a Father Bud doll that had been made for him years ago. On the doll was the sign "WWBD"—"What Would Bud Do?" When the congregation and its leaders faced decisions or problems during the sabbatical period, all they would need to do is ask, "What would Bud do?" When the pastor returned from his sabbatical, he received back many of the symbols. However, when the doll was given back it had a new sign on it that read WFIOFO—"We Figured It Out For Ourselves!"¹

A sabbatical can be a great opportunity for a congregation to learn, or perhaps relearn, that its life and mission don't hinge entirely on the presence and work of ordained clergy. Even when the pastor is away, God is just as present and just as much at work. The people of God are just as much the people of God, a community of faith living out the call of Christ and the way of Christ. A sabbatical has a way of reminding us clergy that the church doesn't rise or fall based on our efforts and productivity, and that the work of God belongs to everyone in the people of God. Remember that our fellowship and fruitfulness aren't built on the foundation of Pastor Kevin, or a particular deacon, or a specific officer in the church, or any one of us as an individual. True, each of us has his or her part in the work of God's people. But ultimately, the congregation is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and his gospel. That was true from the beginning of the sabbatical to its end.

A sabbatical can be a gift that God uses to reconnect us with himself, the true source of our life and salvation. Whatever is ultimately accomplished and achieved is less about our own capacities and more about God's power. It's his promises, not our own perseverance, that bring about the kingdom. That's why the most appropriate response to God's presence and action is gratitude.

We see this confirmed in today's Scripture passage from Luke. Jesus continues his journey toward Jerusalem, the place of his suffering and death. On the way, he passes through border territory where the tension between Jews and Samaritans is even more elevated. He

encounters a group of ten lepers, who keep their distance and announce themselves as unclean. They call out for mercy and help. All this was in keeping with Jewish law. After all, leprosy is a term that covered a range of skin diseases that kept a person isolated and separated from the life of the community. In many ways, to be a leper was to be cut off and invisible.

But Luke says, "When Jesus saw them, . . ." (v. 14). Luke doesn't just mean that the lepers crossed Jesus' field of vision. He means that Jesus truly and deeply saw them. In other words, Jesus didn't just see lepers. He saw human beings who had leprosy. He saw through and beyond their disease and recognized their dignity and personhood. They weren't used to being noticed in this way. Most of the time, others overlooked them, or looked past them, or looked away from them. But Jesus looked at them with eyes that knew them and took in the full measure of their suffering and their need for mercy.

That's really where gratitude starts. Not in how we see things but in how God sees us. Remember that thankfulness doesn't begin primarily within you. Thankfulness begins outside of you, in the eyes of Jesus, the eyes of God. Thankfulness begins with knowing that you are seen, that you are truly seen, by Jesus. Gratitude isn't something you have to generate on your own, with all the determination and effort you can muster. It isn't what you bring to the table in the divine-human relationship. Gratitude is actually the fruit of God's initiative, God's action. It's what happens when you recognize that however bad your circumstances, however deep your need, however relentless your suffering, and however uncertain your future, you aren't invisible or unknown to Jesus. He sees you. He sees into you. He sees into your circumstances, and is responsive to your circumstances.

Jesus' perception is prior to our perception. Jesus' perception is what enables our perception. That's what happens in our text. Jesus commands the lepers to go to show themselves to the priests, so that they could be examined and their healing confirmed. They do as Jesus says, and it's along the way, in the doing, that they experience healing and restoration. They trust and obey, and receive the blessing of God's deliverance. Then Luke says, "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice." There's that phrase again. "When he saw." Except this time, it's not Jesus doing the seeing. It's the leper doing the seeing. He sees, not just that his skin is fresh and healthy. He sees in the sense of recognition. He perceives that this healing isn't just good fortune or the result of a natural process, but is God's work. In other words, he hasn't just gotten better. He has gotten mercy.

So he makes a U-turn and comes back to the source of that mercy. He praises God, throws himself at Jesus' feet, and thanks him. This is the posture of humility and adoration. Jesus has raised him up, but now he bends low. Isn't that often where gratitude takes us? It takes us to our knees. A couple of years ago, at a church banquet, Denzel Washington spoke about living in a constant attitude of gratitude for God's goodness. He said:

Give thanks for blessings every day. Every day. Embrace gratitude. Encourage others. It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. I pray that you put your slippers way under your bed at night, so that when you wake in the morning you have to start on your knees to find them. And while you're down there, say "thank you." A bad attitude is like a flat tire. Until you change it, you're not going anywhere.²

To say that the man with leprosy experienced an attitude adjustment would be an understatement. What he experienced wasn't just a miracle of dermatology, but a miracle of ophthalmology. His spiritual sight was healed. He saw and declared that his deliverance had come from the one true and living God. He is no longer the man who had leprosy. He is the man whom God has rescued and restored. He is no longer defined by his disease but

by the faithfulness and love of God. Here is a person who has been drawn back into relationship with God and humanity. In other words, he has been saved. In fact, Luke ends the story with Jesus saying to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well" (v. 19). This is a blessing that Jesus gives to others in Luke's Gospel (7:50; 8:48; 18:42). It means, "Your faith has saved you."

And notice that in this case, it took an outsider to recognize grace for what it was. When the man saw he was healed, he praised God and fell at the feet of Jesus. Then Luke adds "and he was a Samaritan" (v. 16). An outcast, a foreigner, a stranger, perhaps even an enemy. So the reach of God's grace has no limits. No one's spiritual sight is beyond the hope of restoration. God can open eyes and create grateful worshipers anywhere and everywhere he wants, including here among us. In fact, the reason we're here today, singing our songs, saying our prayers, and presenting our gifts, is because we're the recipients of God's undeserved mercy in Christ. And in the presence of Jesus, all our distinctions and divisions recede and what comes to the fore is our common need for divine grace and healing.

Sunday morning worship is one of the primary ways that we, like the man in today's text, come back to the source of our life and salvation. We return, week by week, to the one who truly and deeply sees us, knows us, cares about us, forgives us, and redeems us. This is what gratitude looks like. But we also know that gratitude is more than just a Sunday spiritual discipline. It's a way of life, a way of putting ourselves in the presence of God on a daily basis. As Vance Havner has described it:

Our biggest problem in the church today is this vast majority of Sunday morning Christians who claim to have known the Master's cure and who return not [at other times] to thank Him by presence, prayer, testimony and support of His church. In fact, the whole Christian life is one big "Thank You," the living expression of our gratitude to God for His goodness. But we take Him for granted and what we take for granted we never take seriously.³

Gratitude is a critical barometer of your spiritual health. When you're not cultivating your awareness of God's blessings, and responding to God's grace and mercy with thankfulness, you're more exposed to the dangers of idolatry. You can lose sight of God as the one true Creator, Provider, and Savior. You may end up lavishing more praise on yourself than on the Lord. You start treating divine blessings as if they're personal achievements. You begin to place your hope in things that can't deliver the security and peace that they promise. Instead of calling out to the Lord, you call out to other things that don't have the power to save. Without gratitude to God, your worship can get misdirected. Other things become your object of worship. And whatever becomes the object of your worship becomes the object of your service.

But gratitude, as an expression of faith, helps keep you in touch with the one from whom all blessings flow. Hopefully our sabbatical experience has done some of that for all of us. As I mentioned earlier, a sabbatical has a way of helping both the pastor and the congregation reconnect with the true source of our life, our salvation, and our power. Through the sabbatical experience, our eyes are opened to see more clearly how dependent we are on the presence and action of God. We're able to perceive more keenly that the presence of Christ, the word of Christ, and the mercy of Christ are what make us the church. And so, like the restored man in today's story, we see, we return, and we praise.

¹ A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2000) 48.

² Jeannie Law, "Denzel Washington: God Has 'Faith in Me,'" *Christian Post* (November 12, 2015).

³ Vance Havner in *The Vance Havner Quote Book. Christianity Today* (Vol. 31, no. 17).