

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 27, 2022

Thank You Jesus

Luke 17:11-19

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name” (Ps. 100:4). That was last Sunday’s call to worship. Actually, it’s every Sunday’s call to worship. Today, even after Thursday’s heightened emphasis on gratitude, it’s still our call to worship. “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.”

When we get settled into the rhythms of our church’s life, we sometimes lose sight of what a unique gathering this is. True, so much of it is familiar to us. Most of you are sitting in the spot where you usually sit. Our order of worship remains essentially the same. Sit here. Stand here. Sing here. Pray here. Give here. Listen here. And yet, step back for a moment and consider what all this adds up to. Here is a body of people whose primary purpose for coming together is to express gratitude to the one whom we praise as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior. Every Sunday, we assemble to offer our thanks, individually and collectively, to the Lord. As author and pastor Eugene Peterson summarizes it,

We recollect all that has happened among us by Christ’s design. We praise the Lord, who makes our lives, like all things, work together for good. Is there any other place in our society where so much is remembered and praised as here among Christians in worship, where there is such a concentration of memory and such exuberance in gratitude?¹

Rather than thoughtlessly go through the motions of another Sunday morning in the sanctuary, let’s reflect on what a sacred opportunity this is, especially in a secular age that’s as committed to self-determination as ours.

In times like these, we need to recall that we’re not here today to perform for the Lord Jesus. We’re here to respond to the Lord Jesus, especially as he moves among us. Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of how preaching is Christ himself walking through the congregation of his followers. And as he walks among us, we call upon his mercy and give thanks for his saving presence.

So it was for the man we meet in today’s text from Luke. As Jesus continues his journey toward Jerusalem, the place of his suffering and death, 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 grievous your sins, 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, falls on his face 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.

What this man who had leprosy has experienced isn't just a miracle of dermatology, but a miracle of ophthalmology. His spiritual sight is healed. He sees and declares that his deliverance has come from the one true and living God. Now, he is no longer the man with 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. After telling us that the man praised and thanked Jesus, 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.²

Notice Havner's emphasis on the risks of taking God, not just his gifts, for granted. True, we offer thanks for the specific blessings and graces that God gives us. The wonder and beauty of the world he has made. Family and friends. Food, clothing, and shelter. Health when we are well. Strength when we are sick. Jobs and income. Opportunities for rest and renewal. And so many other blessings that you could add to the list. But our gratitude for the gifts is inseparable from our gratitude for the Giver. There's a reason that we sing, "Praise God, from Whom all blessing flow / Praise Him, all creatures here below / Praise Him above, ye heavenly host / Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." God is the ultimate object of our adoration and acclaim. Yes, we see the gifts, but we serve the Giver. Or as one person has put it, "Follow every gift back to God himself, and let it be a reason to fall further in love with the Giver."³

That's where the man in today's text ends up, face to face with the Giver. He doesn't just recognize the healing. He also rejoices in the Healer. He returns to the source, not only to express thanks but to offer up praise. His appreciation is coupled with devotion. This isn't just a story about "Thank you." It's also a story about "Thank you Jesus," in whom the saving power of God is present and the reign of God revealed.

Pastor H. B. Charles tells a story about a woman he knew who showed up at church and always prayed the same simple prayer—"O Lord, thank you Jesus." Week after week, she prayed this prayer. The kids at church got to where they would start laughing every time she opened her mouth, because they knew it would be that same prayer—"O Lord, thank you Jesus."

Finally, someone asked her, "Why do you always say the same simple little prayer? She said, "Well, I'm just combining the two prayers that I know. We live in a bad neighborhood and some nights there are bullets flying and I have to grab my daughter and hide on the floor, and in that desperate state all I know how to cry out is, 'O Lord.' But when I wake up in the morning and see that we're okay I say, 'Thank you Jesus.' When I got to take my baby to the bus stop and she gets on that bus and I don't know what's going to happen to her while she's away, I cry, 'O Lord.' And then when 3:00 P.M. comes and that bus arrives and my baby is safe, I say, 'Thank you Jesus.'"

She said, "Those are the only two prayers I know and when I get to church God has been so good I just put my two prayers together, "O Lord, thank you Jesus."⁴

That sounds a lot like the shape of the man's story in today's text. At the beginning he's shouting, "O Lord, have mercy." And by the end he's shouting, "O Lord, thank you Jesus." So here in this place of worship, and in all the sacred spaces of our daily lives, may we seek the Lord's mercy, see it when it happens, and say thanks for it through devotion to him.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *On Living Well: Brief Reflections on Wisdom for Walking in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2021) Kindle edition.

² Vance Havner in The Vance Havner Quote Book. *Christianity Today* (Vol. 31, no. 17).

³ Marshall Segal, "What Comes After Thanksgiving?" *Desiring God*. November 25, 2015. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-comes-after-thanksgiving#better-than-all-his-gifts> (November 22, 2022).

⁴ H. B. Charles, "A Psalm for Giving Thanks," *PreachingToday.com*.