

The Easily Forgotten Practice of Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

Houston Chinese Church
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❖ Introduction

- Today marks the three-month anniversary of the one of the worst hurricanes in recent memory to hit the state of Texas and the city of Houston.
- Causing more than 30,000 people to be displaced, 185,000 homes to be damaged, and at least 91 deaths, Hurricane Harvey – the “costliest natural disaster ever in the United States” – has no doubt left an indelible mark on the hearts and lives of our people.¹
- Many of you know by now that *our* home was one of those damaged by the flood.
- And after packing up our stuff, throwing away flood-damaged items, having the sheetrock cut and wood floors removed, I still remember the day when I saw mold growing in the house we were trying to repair. I fell into a sort of despair.
- You see, even if you clean up a flooded house really well, if you don’t spend the extra time drying up the house, you’re going to risk the spread of mold.
- I remember being all alone in the car that day and asking myself the question we’re taught *not* to ask when going through hardships: *Why is this happening to me?*
- I was trying to get over that bad question and start asking the right one: *What could God possibly be trying to teach me through this?*
- I remember wondering this out loud to a trusted friend later on who replied with great insight: “Well maybe God’s testing you.”
- Maybe God *was* testing me. That’d fit well with what Scripture tells us about trials and hardships, like it says in James 1:2-4, “Count it all *joy*, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the *testing of your faith* produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (emphasis mine).
- I’ll be honest. It’s hard to rejoice and be *grateful* when you’ve just lost most of your furniture to flood waters and have to move out of your beloved home.

¹ “Hurricane Harvey,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Harvey (accessed November 22, 2017).

- It's hard to be *grateful* when you come across old photos of your kid's birthday parties and family times after dinner in the living room. And you see pictures of your kids playing with all those toys they grew up with, but no longer own.
- It's hard to be *grateful* when you wonder why things have to be the way they are.
- Having to work on a sermon about gratitude for the Sunday after Thanksgiving, it's been hard to see exactly where thankfulness actually fits in with a story like mine.
- And whether your house was flooded like mine or you've gone through the loss of loved ones or the loss of a job, you'll know that gratitude doesn't come naturally to the human heart.
- It's not the first instinct that comes when we go through difficult times.
- And then you think about moments in life when things are going well. Maybe God's answered a long-time prayer of yours, or you've just started dating the guy or gal of your dreams, or your retirement account's growing because of the rising stock market.
- Still, gratitude doesn't come easy. More often than not, we fixate on the things in life that we still *don't* have or still *haven't* received from God.
- Have you ever stopped to wonder: *why is that?* What's driving our ingratitude when the Bible so clearly calls us to "give thanks in *all* circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18, emphasis mine)?
- Why's it so *easy* to forget God during good or bad times in life? And what will it take to more regularly turn our hearts back to him in thanksgiving?
- Well I have three lessons that I want to draw out from our text this morning as we wrestle with some of these questions. If you want to follow along, you can find an outline printed in your bulletins.
- What I want to do first is to tackle this question: why is gratitude such a forgettable and overlooked attitude in our day-to-day lives? It's one thing to have a thankful heart when you're gathered together with your family on Thanksgiving each year. But it's another thing to be *characterized* by gratitude.

❖ **The first thing we can learn from our text is this: You've got to examine your heart for the roots of ingratitude.**

- Just to provide some context for you guys, we're in a section of the book of Luke, where Jesus is in the middle of his final journey towards Jerusalem where he would ultimately face his death on the cross, accomplishing his earthly mission.

- And he takes a route through a region between Samaria and Galilee that was usually avoided by devout Jews because of centuries-long prejudice and racial tensions between a group of people, known as the Samaritans, and the Jews.
- The Samaritans, you see, were seen as a sort of half-breeds, social and cultural rejects, because they descended from Jews who long ago had intermarried with foreigners. They weren't *real* Jews by any standard as far as devout Jews were concerned.
- But that doesn't stop Jesus from entering into *this* territory. Let's read together starting in verse 11. Look down there with me: "On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.'"
- Just to clarify a couple things about lepers...when you see the word "leper" or "leprosy" in the Bible, it doesn't necessarily refer to modern leprosy as we know it today.
- A better term to use, according to scholars, would actually just be a "chronic skin condition considered to be defiling."²
- Lepers, in biblical times, were treated as complete outcasts in society. Listen to the OT law concerning lepers from Leviticus 13:46: "He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is *unclean*. He shall *live alone*. His dwelling shall be *outside the camp*" (emphasis).
- And so it makes sense that we find these ten lepers standing at a distance as Jesus enters into the village.
- They call out saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."
- Let's read on in verse 14: "When he saw them he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went they were cleansed."
- Why does Jesus tell them to see the priests?
- Well according to OT law, priests were the only ones who had the authority in Jewish society to judge a leper healed or not.³
- So Jesus is just following the standard rules of his day. Once a priest declared these lepers clean, they'd be free to return back into society.

² Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Leprosy, Leper," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1324.

³ Wayne Grudem and Thomas R. Schreiner, "Notes on the Book of Luke," *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1993.

- But notice that Jesus hasn't actually *healed* them yet.
- The lepers had to take Jesus at his word and head out to see the priests before seeing any change in their skin condition.
- And as they did so, we see in verse 17, that they were healed and cleansed miraculously.
- *But the story isn't over yet.* Look down at verse 15. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice."
- There was only one out of all ten lepers who turned back to Jesus and said, "Thank you." The rest, well, they go their merry way.
- They were ungrateful.
- And why is that? Why were they so ungrateful?
- This is where I think we can learn something from these nine lepers. You might've never considered this, but ingratitude from a scriptural point of view is considered a serious sin.
- 2 Timothy 3:1-2 tells us that "in the last days there will come times of difficulty." For people will, among other things, "be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents," and listen to this, "*ungrateful...*" (emphasis mine).
- But in some sense, I think even ungratefulness or ingratitude is only a surface sin. Underneath, our hearts may actually be driven towards ingratitude by a number of things without us even realizing it.
- So we've got to slow down and look at our hearts to diagnose some of the underlying roots of ingratitude.
- Let me give you just three possible heart motives at the root of ingratitude.
- The first is this: *idolatry – as a root of ingratitude.*
 - Most of us know what it's like to ask God for help in one way or another, receive that help from him, only to later forget the fact that he helped us or blessed us in the first place.
 - Perhaps the reason why we choose to walk away after receiving what we want from God and not turn back to him in worship is because God wasn't who we wanted all along...*those blessings were.*

- Our hearts, as John Calvin famously puts it, are idol factories.⁴
 - And one way our heart idols show up is when we finally receive something we've been waiting for and praying for, we're so satisfied with simply getting what we've always wanted from God.
 - But in doing so, we betray the fact that his *gifts* were really what we wanted all along, not the Giver.
 - I mean think about it. What would make the nine other lepers so content as to forget to turn back and thank Jesus who'd just brought the healing they'd all been waiting for their entire lives?
 - Why would they *not* turn back in gratitude like the tenth leper?
 - Maybe these nine lepers had deeper heart idols, like an image idolatry (since they had such a marred appearance from their chronic skin condition for so long) or an approval idolatry (based on a desire to be accepted by society after all these years of isolation).
 - And once they saw that they were healed, they simply went their merry way because they got what they *ultimately* wanted. They could now regain their standing in society or feel better about themselves for not having the marks of leprous disease on their skin.
 - In the same way, perhaps our tendency to forget the Giver when we receive his gifts is due to underlying idolatries of the heart that point to the fact that we've been counting something or someone as more precious or valuable than God himself.
 - We end up using God in order to get to our heart idols.
- The second possible root of ingratitude is this: *entitlement*.
 - In the passage right before the one we're studying today, Jesus points out the error of servants who take their masters for granted and demand to be treated a certain way as a reward for their service.
 - Instead, Jesus says that the proper attitude of servants to their masters is summed up in the following statement, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10).

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 108.

- All ten lepers were healed, but only one turned back to give thanks. The other nine took Jesus for granted and treated him, in the words of one commentator, like a “Cosmic Butler instead of a Suffering Servant. They did not think they owed him anything, not even their thanksgiving.”⁵
- When entitlement creeps into our hearts, gratitude is one of the first things that goes. We might pray and pray and pray. But when we finally receive an answer, in the very same moment, for some reason we assume we got what we’d always deserved.
- The third possible root of ingratitude is this: *self-reliance*.
 - Jesus tells a parable in Luke 18 about a Pharisee and a tax collector who go up to the temple and pray. The Pharisee, in his prayer, actually *thanks* God. But listen to what he thanks God *for*: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get” (Luke 18:11-12).
 - He boasted in what he brought to the table. He was self-reliant. When he looked at himself, all he could see was his own sense of self-righteousness.
 - The tax collector, on the other hand, “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13).
 - Jesus concludes this parable by saying that it was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who “went down to his house justified” before God. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14).
 - Self-reliant people are the last people to see their need for God.
 - But desperate and needy people are the ones who, like the Samaritan leper, understand just how helpless and unclean they really are. And when God shows mercy to them, they can do nothing but humbly fall down and worship him with thanksgiving.

❖ **Which leads to our second lesson that we can learn from this passage: After examining your hearts for any roots of *ingratitude*, you’ve got to start pointing your heart to the *true source* of gratitude.**

⁵ Philip G. Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2009), 226.

- I couldn't help but notice that on a quick Google search of the terms "gratitude" or the "practice of gratitude," most of the top sites that came up were essentially secular, Buddhist, or positive psychology webpages. There's actually such a thing called "gratitude research." And it has nothing to do with Christianity per se.
- What this tells me is that gratitude is seen as a positive thing across the board. Christians and non-Christians both agree that it's generally better to be grateful rather than ungrateful. Which makes sense right?
- I mean, I don't think you'll ever come across an article with the title, "The Blessings of Ingratitude" or "10 Steps to Becoming a More Ungrateful You In 2018."
- So is there a difference in *Christian* gratitude? Or is the source of gratitude, whether you're Christian or not, simply found in learning to see the positive things in life, or keeping a gratitude journal, or telling yourself three things you're thankful for every day?
- Not that any of these things are bad in and of themselves, but if Christians find the source of their gratitude in the very same things and *only* the same things as non-Christians, what's there really to be uniquely thankful for as a Christian?
- The story of these ten lepers and especially the Samaritan leper points us to a deeper truth that reminds us that the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ and what he's done for wretched sinners like us – is really the only true source of *Christian* gratitude that can sustain us in all circumstances.
- Look down at verse 15 again with me: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."
- Commentators point out that the term for wellness that Jesus uses here is really "a form of the New Testament word for salvation."⁶
- In other words, this story is not just about a man being thankful for being physically healed. No, it's about a man who's received *spiritual* healing and restoration with God.⁷
- Jesus was not just out to heal ten lepers. Jesus healed these ten lepers so that they would ultimately repent of their sins and turn to him in *worship*.

⁶ Ibid., 228.

⁷ Ibid., 229.

- But many times, like the nine lepers who walked away, our heart idols keep us from turning to Jesus in faith because we got what we *really* wanted. God blesses us. He answers prayers. And we run away content, like a kid in a candy store who gets what he wants and forgets to turn back to his mother and say, “Thank you.”
- Physical healing, or a new job, or a good grade on a test are *never* the ultimate reasons why God answers prayers.
- The Samaritan leper who placed his faith in Jesus and was saved reminds us that our hearts were meant to find ultimate satisfaction *not* in the gifts, but in the Giver himself.
- The Samaritan also felt no sense of entitlement. He knew he was doubly unclean being a half-breed, ethnically-isolated Samaritan as well as a disease-laden, socially-isolated leper.
- But his recognition of being a “spiritual outsider,” completely unworthy of God’s grace, was also the reason why he so readily turned back to Jesus in faith.⁸
- We too are spiritual outsiders apart from Christ. The Bible tells us that, in and of ourselves, we are “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).
- The Samaritan leper reminds us that God owes *nothing* to us. And we deserve *nothing* but hell, eternal separation from him, because of our heart idols, our sin, and our open rebellion against him.
- And unlike the other nine, the Samaritan leper shows us what it means to be completely dependent on God’s grace to cleanse us from the inside out. He was anything *but* self-reliant.
- The gospel tells us that we as wretched sinners have no way of fixing our broken relationship with God. God himself had to make a way for us to get back to him.
- And he did this by sending his son, Jesus Christ, to live the kind of life we were expected to live, and to die the kind of death we should have died because of our sins.
- He was raised back to life three days later so that those who now place their faith in this living Savior and make him the Lord of their lives will be reconciled and made right with God again.
- And when a person becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit comes to reside in our hearts (Gal. 4:6) so that things like joy and thankfulness begin to *supernaturally* take root in our hearts no matter our circumstances.

⁸ Ibid., 228.

- Friends, one of the main reasons that God answers our prayers and heals us of our sicknesses and blesses us with good things is so that we would turn back to him and worship him as the God that he is.
- It's true, not everyone does this. Even though God gives good things to Christians and non-Christians alike through his "common grace," not everyone falls at the feet of Jesus in worship.
- The nine lepers who walked away represent people who've been blessed by God, but never remember to turn back to him in thanksgiving, much less turn back to him in faith.
- The Samaritan leper represents the kind of person who recognizes his or her uncleanness before a holy God and responds to his grace by putting their trust in him.
- *So which one are you?*
- If you're here in this room today and have yet to place your faith in Christ, ask yourself: has the Lord done great things for you? Have there been answers to prayers on your behalf where nothing else could explain it except that God did it?
- Listen to this quote by a well-known preacher: "It is not enough for us to do what God says, as the other nine lepers did... It is not even enough for us to be grateful when God restores our health or grants us some other blessing... We will be saved forever only if we come to Jesus in faith, trusting him the way the tenth leper did and then worshiping at his feet."⁹
- **Like the Samaritan leper, the most important way you can show gratitude towards God is to fall at the feet of Jesus, worshiping him and committing yourself to him as your Lord and Master.**
- And if you have a relationship with Christ already, make sure that the way you practice gratitude is not just like anyone else around you. Make sure you practice a *Christian* gratitude, rooted in nothing else than the gospel itself.
- Preach the gospel regularly to yourself. Be reminded of God's mercy on your life. Share your testimony with others regularly to refresh your memory about the ways in which God has turned your life around and changed you to be more like Christ.
- And if all else fails, spend some time thinking about what your life would be like *right now* if not by the grace of God, you were a Christian. Let *that* be something to thank God for – *daily*.

⁹ Ibid, 229-230.

- For God has “delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).
- Now that we’ve examined some of the roots of ingratitude and explored the source of true, Christian gratitude, how are we to take seriously the Bible’s command to “give thanks in all circumstances” on a daily basis?

❖ **This leads us to our third and final lesson: You have to train your heart in the practice of gratitude.**

- I think you’d all agree with me by now that gratitude doesn’t come naturally. No, left to ourselves, we’d all continue to fixate on the things in life that we still *don’t* have or still *haven’t* received from God, rather than what he’s already given and done for us.
- Christians and non-Christians alike *want* to be more grateful. But more often than not, ingratitude – in the form of complaining and criticism – takes over our thoughts and feelings towards God.
- So what can we do to cultivate a more grateful heart?
- The Samaritan leper gives us a helpful example. Look down at verse 15 again: “Then one of them, *when he saw that he was healed*, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks” (emphasis mine).
- Notice that, like the other nine lepers, healing comes *on the way* to see the priests. But unlike the others, this Samaritan leper doesn’t wait long before he turns back around to thank Jesus.
- It seems simple enough, but one way to keep ourselves from being ungrateful is to turn back to God and give him thanks *right away* each time he answers our prayers or blesses us.¹⁰
- This guards against what we’re all naturally tempted to do and *forget what just happened*.
- Our hearts, so full of idolatry, are prone to forget the Giver once the gifts start coming our way.
- And even if idolatry isn’t at the root of your ingratitude, the simple passing of time is usually all it takes for us to forget what God’s done.

- One thing I try to do during my own devotions is to write down specific prayer requests each month. These are special prayer requests that I put down on a flash card and leave in my Bible as a bookmark.
- Well I got out of the habit of doing this earlier this spring. And when I looked back on the card I'd last written in March, there was a specific prayer request that I'd forgotten I was even praying about and that God had answered since then!
- I forgot to thank God for answering that prayer though it was as easy as looking back at my old prayer requests sitting in my Bible.
- And yes, these are small things. But added up, they make a huge difference in the way we experience God and are inclined to trust him to do *more* in our lives.
- So what are ways you can be training your heart to more regularly practice gratitude? What are ways to help fight against this tendency to forget?
- You could write down important prayer requests in a journal or on flash cards like me to help keep track of the times God actually answers those prayers.
- Another way I've found helpful in cultivating a heart of gratitude is to structure your prayers in a way that includes a time of thanksgiving. The one I've been using since college is A-C-T-S.
- I first start off "A": a time of *adoring* God for who he is and what he's like. This includes things like his sovereignty over all things, his great love and wisdom and kindness and mercy and grace. You get the point.
- Then "C": I go into a time of *confession*, where I think about the past day or so and confess any specific sins I've committed to God. And I ask for his forgiveness.
- Then "T": This is where I spend time *thanking* God, usually first for his forgiveness in light of any sins I'd just confessed. I remind myself of verses like 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
- I remind myself of the gospel and thank God for what he's done to reconcile me back to him. I also use this time to thank God for anything else that comes to mind.
- Then "S": I spend the rest of my prayer times in *supplication*, which is just a fancy word for asking God for help in my life or on behalf of others.

- Using a prayer model like A-C-T-S helps to balance out our prayer lives so that we're not spending all our time simply asking God for things. But we spend time *adoring* him, *confessing* our sins, and *thanking* him for all that he's already done for us.
- If you're needing a fresh start to your prayer life or looking for a way to build gratitude into your life on a daily basis, I want to encourage you to start using the A-C-T-S model when you pray.

❖ Conclusion

- Gratitude doesn't come naturally. And *Christian* gratitude doubly so. A true heart of gratitude can only come from a supernatural event – a heart that's been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- So whatever cause might be at the root of your tendency towards ingratitude – keep pointing your heart to the gospel, to the *true source* of Christian gratitude.
- Then and only then will you find your heart truly satisfied. Because remember, satisfaction doesn't come from the gifts. It can only come from the Giver.