

## ***Taking Time to Turn Back – Luke 17:11-19***

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It's a familiar story, this tale of the ten lepers who are miraculously healed, with only one of them turning back to thank Jesus for healing him.

We don't know what the lepers said, felt or did after they presented themselves to the priests. It's unlikely that they were irritated by their healing. More likely, they were ecstatic and jabbered nonstop among themselves as they went to the priests and after the visit itself. They may have gone to the pub and celebrated and told everyone within earshot about their healing. And it's implausible to believe that the nine would attribute their healing to any agency except a divine one. Ungrateful? Very unlikely.

Jesus attaches importance to the fact that the so-called 10<sup>th</sup> leper "returned" to the scene, "praising God" and appraising Jesus of the miraculous turn of events, as if Jesus didn't know.

He returned. All of them were probably grateful, but just one returned to express it.

Jesus' words and actions indicate that there is a difference between physical wellness and spiritual wellness. All the lepers were healed, but clearly, the last leper gained something else. He gained wellness. And this act of returning to Jesus and expressing his gratitude, perhaps more so than just simply having faith, made him well. His faith was perhaps just the channel through which his gratitude poured.

One could conceivably conclude, then, what has been concluded by several scientific studies: that expressing gratitude is good for our health.

I don't know about you, but I find it difficult if not next to impossible at times, to feel gratitude. I'm embarrassed to say it, guilty even. And that's during moments when everything is going well. Never mind the difficulty of being grateful when things are not so good.

Take, for example, how you might feel if you burned the Thanksgiving turkey you were going to serve on Thursday. Would you really be thankful? That might take some doing. Your gratitude would

have to take somewhat of a hit. And yet, you might still feel reasons to be grateful despite this culinary disaster. For example, if you burned the turkey:

Salmonella won't be a concern, no one will overeat, everyone might think it's just Cajun blackened, uninvited guests will think twice about showing up next year, your cheese-broccoli-lima-bean casserole will gain newly-found appreciation, your pets won't pester you for scraps, the smoke alarm was due for a test anyway, carving the bird will provide a good cardiovascular workout, after dinner the guys can take the bird to the yard and play football, you'll get to the desserts quicker, and you won't have to face three weeks of turkey sandwiches.

So, you could be grateful you charred it. It would take some real work, though.

Ah, work. Yes, sometimes it takes work to be grateful. Just like the leper who intentionally went back to Jesus to thank him for his healing, it took some action on his part to unleash his gratitude.

Last week, we collectively expressed our gratitude to God for God's many blessings in our lives by completing an Estimate of Giving card for 2024. Before you completed that card, I'm curious as to how many of you were really grateful for God's blessings, intentionally thinking about it.

At some point, though, when you picked up that pen (or went online to complete the form) and wrote in those numbers and put your name on the card (yes, your own name!), I bet some sort of change came over you. And I bet it wasn't a realization of how much poorer you're going to be in 2024 after giving to the church.

No, I'm almost certain that in the act of completing that card, you felt more grateful. As you wrote, I bet you were reminded of how good you have it. Despite whatever hardships you're enduring, I suspect you were becoming more grateful as you wrote.

Gratitude is unleashed when we practice it. Gratitude is unleashed when we give our money, contribute some skill or talent to the cause of something greater in our lives, and even when we think of all the good things that can come from burning the Thanksgiving turkey.

And practicing gratitude does make our lives healthier.

Nancy Leigh DeMoss writes in the fall 2010 issue of *Just Between Us* (18-19), "I'd like to coin a new word for those who may be deficient in the gratitude department (which includes all of us from time to time). I'm calling for 'gratitudinal change.'... In appealing for gratitudinal change, I am not calling you to something that's trivial and inconsequential, much less something that's contrived or insincere. When gratitude becomes your default setting, life changes... the whole world looks different when you see it through gratitude-colored glasses. A problem that used to bury you now takes its rightful place behind twenty other blessings that are bigger than it'll ever be. A recurring issue that once brought out a whole range of pent-up emotions now only produces a new excuse for praising God with greater fervor than ever, knowing He is more than true and trustworthy."

Gratitudinal change can also lead to a whole host of improvements in our lives.

New research is showing that people who count their blessings may find themselves sleeping better, exercising more and caring more about others. People who remind themselves of the things they are grateful for — people who count their blessings one by one, consciously, every day — show significant improvements in mental health, and even in some aspects of physical health. And these results appear to be true whether you are a healthy college student or an older person with an incurable disease, according to research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

But, we so often, we have to practice gratitude to feel it.

Back in the 1930s, the Jewish philosopher/theologian, Martin Buber, wrote a book in which he explained that our human interactions are of two kinds. The first he called the "I-it" relationship. This is when we have no vital concern for other people; we are detached from them. You stop at a restaurant for lunch and a server takes your order. You don't know her and have no real desire to. You don't know about her broken marriage or her concerns about her children or her sore feet or whatever. She's primarily a person who provides you a service. Your relationship to her is essentially the same as to a robot who could deliver food to your table. This is a subject-to-object, I-it relationship.

The other way in which we relate to others, says Buber, is the "I-thou" relationship. This is when the other person ceases to be a "something" to us and becomes a "someone." I-thou is where I view you not in terms of what you can do for me, but in terms of who you are as yourself.

And sincerely thanking someone forces us to see the other person as *thou* and not as *it*, and that changes both the other person and us.

That's something John Kralik discovered. As 2008 dawned, Kralik was living in one room in Los Angeles, separated from his wife and watching his law practice sinking in hard times. But he started the year by taking a walk in the mountains, and on that walk, he became aware of an inner voice saying, "Until you learn to be grateful for the things you have, you will not receive the things you want."

So he decided to begin writing thank-you notes, and he started with his oldest son. At Christmas, the son, a grown man, had given him a one-cup-at-a-time coffee maker. With this gift, Kralik said, his son "was saying that he knew something about me. I'm a notorious caffeine freak." But when he sat down to write his son a thank-you note, he realized that he didn't know the address. Kralik, who has since written a book titled *365 Thank Yous: The Year a Simple Act of Daily Gratitude Changed My Life*, said:

"Realizing you do not have the address of someone really takes you out of yourself and helps you focus on the other person. You begin asking questions such as, "Where are they living? How are they doing?" We get so wrapped up in the day-to-day that we lose touch. I decided to hand-write a note rather than send him one that was machine created."

Do you hear the "I-thou" there?

In any case, when Kralik called his son to get the address, his son said he'd like to come by and take his dad out to lunch. And to his surprise, while they were at lunch, his son repaid a \$4,000 loan that Kralik had forgotten about. So afterward, Kralik wrote his son another note, thanking him for repaying the loan, and admitting that he really needed the money.

As the year progressed, Kralik made it a practice to handwrite someone a thank-you note every day. And that eventually included family members, clients and even the server at the shop where he got his morning coffee. And to his surprise, gratitude became his way back to success and

harmony. "I was at the point of financial collapse, but I decided to keep saying thank you," said Kralik. "I wrote to other attorneys and to good clients." He also wrote to people he'd lost touch with, some of whom renewed the friendship.

When the year was up, he stopped writing the notes briefly, but said, "That didn't work out for me." He resumed the practice and continued to write a note of thanks a day.

Kralik admits that he didn't gain control of the universe, and he says that there continued to be some setbacks. But, he says, "In the act of being thankful -- which is after all good manners -- my world began to thrive." Indeed, Kralik went on to become a judge on the Los Angeles Superior Court.

Kralik, in the spirit of the gospel story for today, took time to turn back like the 10<sup>th</sup> leper did. He practiced gratitude in order to feel grateful.

Sometimes when you don't feel it (even during Thanksgiving week), gratitude can be unleashed by a simple act—sending a thank you note, filling out an estimate of giving card, visiting a neighbor, mowing somebody's yard, or feeding a hungry family.

It's when we recognize another person's need in our acts of service that we recognize how blessed we indeed are. I pray that you especially recognize those blessings this week.