

SMALL GROUP LESSON

This Thankless Generation

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Lesson Aim

To understand that thankfulness isn't an option, but a necessity to attain wholeness in a thriving Christian life.

Scripture Text

"And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole." – Luke 17:19

Additional Scriptures

Luke 17:11-19

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you have been admitted to a special college. Only a select few are allowed in and no one is accepted without unique qualifications. Unfortunately, this isn't the first college you chose to attend—it's a college only for students who are afflicted with leprosy. Of leprosy, Wikipedia states, "skin lesions are the primary external symptom. Left untreated, leprosy can be progressive, causing permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes. Contrary to popular belief, leprosy does not actually cause body parts to simply fall off."¹ The fact that you are able to be with others who are suffering from leprosy is comforting, but you live within sight of others colleges. Those students are able to leave and return to their campuses; they don't have to yell at people from a distance to warn them not to come too close; they can interact, touch, and love without fear.

For a leper, not having to be isolated would be heaven. For a leper, not having to worry about what you might do to others would be heaven. For a leper, the freedom to come and go would be heaven. For a leper in biblical times, life was a constant reminder that you were a leper, and there was no medication on earth that could heal you.

Such was the life of the 10 lepers who happened upon Jesus in Luke 17. Actually, this Bible story has all the makings of a story that just didn't happen. Luke gives us no significant facts about these lepers—we don't know who they were, where they came from, nor do we know what happened to them once they were cleansed. We simply learn that Jesus was passing between Samaria and Galilee when he entered a village. In this village there were 10 lepers who began yelling toward Jesus. Yet, they also yelled, "Jesus, Have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:13).

It is nearly unimaginable that these lepers would have gotten up that morning and gone for a walk. They must have had some idea that Jesus would be in the vicinity, for desperate people often take desperate chances. Jesus didn't say, "Well hello and who are you? Where do you come from? Why do you want me to have mercy on you?" All He did was say, "Go and show yourselves to the priest."

Perhaps they had identified themselves as unclean already, or he had seen their affliction from afar, or perhaps Jesus had divine knowledge of their condition. Regardless of how He knew, Jesus just said go do what you are supposed to do after cleansing (i.e., go to your priest and let him examine you, so that he will declare you no longer a leper). Of course, this meant a life that can be lived once again with friends and loved ones in their home towns.

The 10 lepers began to leave and were healed as they were walking. Then one of the lepers chose

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to delay confirmation from the priest (which meant a life of freedom) in order to go back and thank Jesus for this miraculous gift. Scripture says that he fell on his face and began praising Jesus and thanked Him for His healing. Jesus asked, "Where are the other nine?" before making an unusual statement, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." Some biblical versions say "whole," which indicates that the thankful leper no longer had any disfigurements on his skin, face, or body.

The distinction between the one and the nine is that all were healed of their leprosy, but only one was made whole. Nine were cleansed, but still had the visible scars and possible dismemberment. One had neither dismemberment or scars. His praise and his thanks brought complete restoration from the ordeal of leprosy.

There's no more powerful story of the power of thankfulness than this—it can make you whole!

Whether due to affluence or human nature, our society has become increasingly unthankful. Perhaps this is because we live in a society where there are only victims. (You cannot be thankful when you have the attitude that something shouldn't have ever happened to you in the first place.) Whatever the reason, the ease of thanklessness threatens all of us with an incomplete—and therefore partially ineffective—Christianity.

THE IDEAS

Understanding the Dangers of Thanklessness

Too many times, we think we understand what a condition like thanklessness indicates, or cluck our tongues at those clueless nine lepers without bothering to examine our own condition. For instance, thanklessness indicates:

Pride—It's easy to forget where the blessings came from and it's easy to begin to see yourself as the reason why things go well, with the additional benefit of blaming others when they don't.

This is something that we see every day. You rub shoulders with people every day who look down on others because they aren't as smart as they are, they don't dress as nice, they go to a lesser university, they aren't as good-looking, and the list continues forever. Yet, too many these items are only marginally within our control, while the reality is that none of us chose our looks or our intellect, as our parents gifted us with both

There's a type of person who takes all blessings—earned and unearned—for granted after the obligatory (but quickly forgotten), "Thank you Jesus," as they secretly believe that all these blessings are deserved. Whether they say it or not, they often think, "I am worthy of these blessings due to superior intelligence (or breeding or family name) and clean living. After all, doesn't the Bible promise blessings on people like me?"

The reality is that we all have a certain level of pride. Otherwise we wouldn't care about how we look, smell, or how well we do. Yet pride begins to grow into a self-satisfaction in yourself—who you are, and who you are becoming.

A Self Absorbed Mentality—While selfishness is often another word for pride, being self-absorbed is different—it's not not thinking about others, but only thinking about yourself and thinking everyone else exists to facilitate your life.

Thus, when a crisis occurs, they instantly wonder why things are happening to me this way?

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Or they are so entrenched in their own world that they fail to think of others and their plights (unless its their pet cause or they enjoy being the personal benefactor to someone). It's all about me!

For example: You have been working hard to receive a fellowship for the upcoming Summer, and so has your roommate. You find out that you received the fellowship. but that your roommate's fellowship provides a bigger stipend and (s)he will be able to go on an overseas trip along with it. You are happy about your success, but your happiness is overshadowed by your roommate's news. As a result, you immediately begin to withdraw from your roommate and become distant because it just isn't fair that your roommate's fellowship is better than yours!

There are some social critics that believe that self-absorption is the biggest vice of this generation. When every fast food restaurant caters to every consumer's whims, when music is personally chosen for our personal players, when many college classes are videoed to be viewed at the student's choice, with the notes posted in advance on the internet, it's hard to argue with them.

Bitterness

It is the thankless person who takes everything personal—as if God were personally afflicting you for His own amusement.

One couple gives this anti-testimony: "One recent year turned into a money pit for us. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. Our furnace and air conditioning went out, our car needed a new transmission, there was the dental crown that was needed, and it never stopped—\$8,000 worth of unexpected expenses that year. For some, this may not seem like a lot of money, but to us it was mammoth! We began to look around at our friends and neighbors. We saw this couple—they were building a new house. Then we notice that person with the new car. The person on the other side of the church had just received an amazing job promotion! Everyone around us was reaping the blessings of God but us. It wasn't hard to come to the conclusion that God had let us down and, on top of that, He was goading us by blessing practically everyone around us. Why would God allow this to happen to us? After all, we were faithful in paying our tithes, we gave in offerings, we spent endless hours in ministry—yet some of the people being blessed did none of that! Ultimately, our thanklessness led us to blame God rather than accept that sometimes you just have bad years."

It's easy for envy to transmute into bitterness and poison your outlook. It's easy to let discouragement poison your walk with God. It's easy to justify bitterness because of the tough experiences you're suffering through. It's important to cleanse bitterness from your heart so that you can realize there's so much room in life for thanksgiving.

Interaction

Have you ever exhibited the thankless characteristics of pride, bitterness, or being self-absorbed? Did you realize it at the time or later? How did you feel about yourself? How do you detect it in others? What do you think about people who are always like that?

Living Thankfulness

In 2006, National Public Radio stated that "<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5503675>" writing a handwritten note is still the best way to send a thank you. But do

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people do it? Sandra E. Lamb writes in her book *How to Write It*, “We write 75 to 80 percent fewer thank you notes, appreciation notes, congratulation notes, thinking-about-you notes, and just-a-note notes than our grandmothers did.”²

Often, the problem is not the ability to send a thank you message, but our own sense of duty to be thankful. Thankfulness is not cultivated in our society. Professors and pastors who open new vistas of thought and imagination to us, who inspire us with their passion, are too often overlooked except for the occasional moment where we feel compelled to say something. Friends share time and effort, lend money and rides, yet are often overlooked.

When you see the progression of what occurs when you are unthankful, you would think people would begin countering it, yet we always hear how busy everyone is instead, or “I meant to.” You can divide thankfulness into three levels:

Level One—Appreciation

This is usually a feeling that spurs some type of positive action.

John 6:11 tells us, “And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would.” Here Jesus is modeling that we should be thankful for the food that we partake of—it isn’t just a given that we will have food, or shelter, or clothes, or a church family, or friends . . .

Examples: You are generally polite. You say thank you when someone does something nice to you and you usually pray before meals etc.

Level Two—Gratitude

This is generally something nice you do for someone who may not specifically deserve it, but the overall situation is such that it’s still deserved.

II Samuel 9:7 tells us, “And David said unto him, Fear not: for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father’s sake, and will restore thee all the land.” Saul, David’s worst enemy in the world, was also the father of Jonathan, his best friend in the world. As a show of gratitude for this friendship, David found Jonathan’s son, who had been hidden away, and brought him to the palace and gave him special treatment. David looked past what Saul had done to him and allowed a relative, a man who could start a rebellion by claiming that he deserved to be king, to live. By this gesture he knew there was nothing that the house of Saul could do to repay him.

Examples of gratitude. There are many times that we have more than what we need. When you consistently exhibit gratitude you look for ways to help others who are not as fortunate. This might be something as simple as inviting a non-family member to be part of a holiday dinner. Or giving a grocery store gift card to someone who is out of work. In these cases the recipients can do nothing in return for you. This is a show of gratitude for what you have by bestowing blessings on to others, without thinking there will be a return gesture.

Level Three—Thanksgiving

This is a spiritual condition that is exemplified as a form of worship, acknowledging divine blessing no matter your condition.

Genesis 8:20-21 tells us, “And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake.”

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God had just wiped out mankind in a flood. Only Noah and his family survived. Upon leaving the ark, Noah built an altar and gave offerings to the Lord. As a result, God made an eternal promise to mankind for him that the rainbow would remain a promise that the earth would never be flooded again. God finds favor in those who show their thanks as a form of worship.

This thanks that Noah offered up went beyond a mere gesture, it was an all-consuming heartfelt acknowledgment of who provided everything for him and his family.

If Noah represented the attitude many have today, he would have gotten off the ark a little upset with God, asking, “Why did you leave us in there for that long?” “Why did you make me work so hard on the ark with all those stinking animals?” “Whatever happens now isn’t my fault, it’s yours because you did all this!” Instead, Noah had a heart of worship that acknowledged God’s being as everything to him—and God relished this spirit of worship.

One examples of thanksgiving might be: You have had a lousy year financially, but you respond with generosity toward the needs of others. You lose a loved one, but you still thank God for His abundant blessings (even though you aren’t happy with life at the moment), as you realize that God is in control and loves you and with that you have ultimate faith in God’s plan through this sorrow.

Your thankfulness as worship bypasses the current situation, what the situation looks like, and it bypasses your current feelings—your thankfulness as worship is consistent.

Interaction

Which level of thankfulness did you identify yourself on? Why do you think you’re at that level? Quickly make up a plan to move to the next, higher level to better please God.

Overcoming a Thankless Society

Living in our society today makes it hard to be thankful. You are consistently encouraged to fight for yourself, promote yourself, and exalt your accomplishments. (It is because of you that you are where you are today and if you are not where you want to be then it is someone else’s fault.) This type of attitude can permeate your very being, yet as a Spirit-filled Christian you can overcome this attitude with thankfulness.

You can combat this prevalent attitude by practicing small—say thank you to strangers, open doors for others, offer acts of kindness without regard for who they are, shake the hands of everyone at church not just those you know, and offer a smile to the world. Thanksgiving is a concerted effort—it doesn’t come naturally.

Then begin practicing larger—begin writing notes, emails or texts of thanks to others. Thank them for the time they put into campus ministry, Sunday school, or thank them for always being cheerful. It doesn’t take much to find things to be thankful for when you maintain a thankful attitude. Look for things to thank others and God for in every situation. Ask yourself: What can I be thankful for in this situation? For instance, you might have suffered a flat tire, but “What can I be thankful for in this situation?” I can be thankful because it could have blown and caused a wreck. Or maybe the flat could have occurred at a worse time on a worse road.

These scenarios may seem odd at first, but the more you develop a spirit of thanksgiving, the more you realize that thankfulness is an attitude that must be cultivated every day.

Interaction

Why is it so difficult to cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving? Is it harder when you own more?

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CONCLUSION

Without a spirit of thanksgiving the tenth leper would have been healed, but he would never have been whole. Thanksgiving brings an inner life that is complete in God. And while this has plenty of meaning, a Christian cannot be completely whole without complete and worshipful thanksgiving.

It's simple, almost too simple, so perhaps that allows us to find ourselves too busy, too important, too overfocused on the priorities of life to remember that the essential are often best expressed by a heartfelt thank you. That spiritual wholeness can also result is simply a greater blessing.

LED-BY-THE-SPIRIT QUESTIONS

1. Are some personalities better suited to being thankful than others?
2. How can we work to resist the easy layers of thanklessness, like pride, bitterness, and a self-absorbed mentality? How can we monitor our progress in the coming week?
3. Can you think of a time where a spirit of thanksgiving helped make you whole?
4. What can we do this week to improve our attitudes of thanksgiving (appreciation, grateful, gratitude, thanksgiving)? How can we monitor our progress?
5. Does it help you to see thankfulness as worship to God? Why/why not?
6. How can we personally cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving within ourselves?

PRAYER

Lord, I know that I am not thankful enough. Please help me to be more aware of my actions and my attitudes so that I don't offer a quick "Thank you" that is forgotten as soon as the words leave my mouth. Reprogram my heart and mind to see the good in life and others, so that I can shine as an example of spiritual thanksgiving that all will notice. Help me to always remember that you care about me and want me to grow into the best person imaginable. This might not always be what I had in mind, but I realize sometimes I have to go through difficult times to become a better person. Please help me understand this, but mostly to be thankful for this growing process into a Christian who becomes whole through thanksgiving. Amen! ★

Foot Notes: January 4, 2009, 4:10 p.m. - "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy>" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy> Page 213.