

Grace and Gratitude

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 12, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Micah 1:2; 2:1-10; Psalm 26; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Then said Jesus, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Luke 17:17, 18

There's no story in all the gospels which shows such deep ingratitude as this. The lepers came to Jesus with desperate longing; he cured them; and nine never came back to give thanks. So often, once a person gets what they want, they never come back. It's true in human relationships and it's true in our relationship with God. We get what we want and we don't come back. We run to God with our petitions, we bang away on heaven's door but when we get what we want we're so slow to thank and praise God.

1. So often we're ungrateful.

«Think, for example, of *the common ordinary blessings of each day.* Are we grateful for these? I remember as a young seminary intern working with the Revd. Richard Armstrong who's now a professor of evangelism at Princeton Seminary. He took me to a nursing home to visit people. When we left he looked at me and said, "Ted, do you know what a blessing it is just to walk out in the sunshine like this without a walker; or to breathe the air freely without being attached to an oxygen tank; or just to be able to get out of bed in the morning and to feed yourself." There are so many everyday blessings that we take for granted. Do you take time each day to thank God for them in your daily devotions? Do you have daily devotions?

«Or think about those *strange and mysterious events we all*

experience from time to time; the unexpected answers to prayer, the strange coincidences that leave us scratching our heads in amazement? In the hour of darkness and in the nightmare of anxiety we pray, "O God, if you'll help me, I'll serve you with my life for ever. I promise!" And God helps us; but that vow we made, where is it today?

«For still another thing, think about *the facts of our Christian faith*. Think for a moment about what we believe and confess as Christians. Behind this vast and awesome universe, is not silence and nothingness, but a loving heavenly Father.

Or just think of Jesus. In Jesus we see God in the flesh. God became a ~~common working man, a carpenter.~~ He knows what it's like to work and to ~~get~~ tired and to have to pay taxes. He knows what it's like to be a leper, despised and rejected of men and acquainted with grief. He knows what it's like to face a painful, lingering death. And more than that, like us, he knows what it's like to carry a load of sin and guilt on his back, not because he, himself ever sinned, but because on the cross he took our sin upon himself and let it drag him down into the abyss of hell in our place. Or think of how Jesus rose from the grave. Death has been vanquished.

Jesus lives, and so shall I:
Death, thy sting is gone for ever!

As Christians, we accept that. We say we believe. But are we astonished by it? Has it ever overwhelmed us with gratitude? Do we take time, every day, to turn to Christ in prayer for these tremendous facts of our Christian faith? Do we return to him faithfully each week to give him thanks?

2. *How is that we can be so ungrateful? especially those nine lepers who never returned to give thanks. Why in the world*

do you think they didn't return to thank Jesus? Let's just try to imagine why.

«For one thing, maybe they felt they deserved the miracle. Maybe they even felt bitter about their wasted years as a leper. "What did I ever do to deserve leprosy? How could God let something like this happen to me in the first place? It's about time he healed me! Do you expect me to thank him for being so slow to correct this injustice I've suffered?"

Human nature always has a tendency to claim that it deserves things which come to us by God's sheer grace. Think about it! Have we deserved our health, when the hospitals of the world are full of sufferers? Have we deserved the human love and affection of friends and family? Have we deserved to live in this land of freedom and plenty? Have we deserved the miracle of God's friendship and forgiveness?

I remember one night seven years ago when Andrew was almost one year old. He had a terrible case of croup. We rushed him to the hospital in the middle of the night. He had to fight for every breath of air. It looked as if his chest was going to cave in as he gasped for air. We had to leave him in the hospital for a week in an oxygen tent. And during that time I found myself crying out to God for Andrew and thinking all the while, "Why should God hear me? There are so many mothers and fathers in this world crying out to God for their children and some will die and some will live. Why should God answer me?" I knew that I didn't deserve a miracle. I knew that it was all of grace; all God's unmerited favor.

But maybe the nine lepers didn't return to give thanks because they thought God owed it to them to heal them.

«Maybe another reason was that they felt *other things were more important. Christ could wait.* There were a lot of urgent things to take care of. After all, they'd been segregated, ostracised, quarantined all these years. They had families to visit they hadn't seen in years. And after living for so many years on welfare, would they be able to find a job? And there was so much in the city they wanted to see, 'the sights that dazzle'. They'd missed so much of life. They wanted to cram every minute with activity trying to make up for lost time. Christ could wait.

Isn't that like us so much of the time. We don't mean to be ungrateful. But Sunday is my only day off. We're just too preoccupied, too burdened with so many things to do to have much time to return to Christ to thank and praise him. Christ can wait!

«Or, for a third reason, maybe the nine simply thought, *"I don't have to return to praise Christ for what he's done for me. I can praise God for Jesus wherever I am.* God isn't interested in the formality of turning around and going back and kneeling and praising God. All sorts of hypocrites do that. But I can praise God all by myself, in the silence of my heart; on the golf course, in my living room, in my bed. After all, religion is a private thing, just between God and me."

So there were all sorts of reasons why they didn't return and I'm sure all of us have rationalised our own ingratitude; our own failure to turn back, day after day, week after week, to give Christ thanks.

3. But that's not the end of the story. *There was one man who said, "No- Christ shall not wait!* The city can wait. My family can wait. My friends can wait. My recreation can wait. My job can wait. But not Christ! After all, he healed me! He gave me a whole new life! And if you nine

won't come back with me I'll go alone. So one came back to thank Jesus.

And what about us? Will we go the way of the nine, or will we turn back, week after week, day after day, to praise God, to fall at the feet of Jesus and to give him thanks?

«I believe that the Risen Christ is as eager and happy and thrilled to hear us thank him as we are when someone remembers to thank us.

One night last week when I was putting Mark to bed he hugged me and said, "You're the bestest daddy in the whole world." Don't you think that made my day? He could have asked me for anything and I'd have given it to him. And yesterday I put some shelves in Philip's room. It would've taken a half-decent carpenter about an hour to do the job but it took me all day. But when I was finished Philip was ecstatic. I heard him telling Kay, "Daddy is really a good carpenter isn't he?" I love it, I love it, I love it! And do you think the Risen Christ, who loves us so much, is any less eager to hear our praise and thanksgiving?

we don't give this thanks and praise because we think God is going to give us increased blessings.
«I heard a story of a traveller out in Africa watching a nun dressing the wounds of a leper. The wounds were revolting, gruesome and repulsive. As he watched her, he said, "I wouldn't do that for ten thousand dollars." She looked up at him, and said, "I wouldn't either." She wasn't doing it for all the money in the world. She was doing it for love, out of gratitude to the one who loved her and gave himself for her.

«It would be a wonderful thing if, from this congregation today, there went up to God a great new surge of gratitude and thanksgiving. We're going to listen now to the choir sing praise to Christ. *Jesus, Joy of My Desiring*. We're going to have an opportunity to share some joys and concerns. We're going to turn to God in prayer. We're going to give some of

our money to God out of gratitude for all he's given us. Then we're all going to join in singing our closing hymn. You may not be familiar with it. Whether you know it or not, let's make a joyful noise unto the Lord when we sing it. Like that one leper who returned to Christ, let's sing that closing hymn to Christ, praising God with a loud voice:

O may this strange, this matchless grace,
This Godlike miracle of love,
Fill the whole earth with grateful praise,
And all the angelic choirs above.

Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

Let us pray: Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you've done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love.

We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side.

We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.

We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.

Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he overcame death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom.

Grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know him and make him known; and through him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to you in all things. Amen.