

## What God Wants to Know: Where are the Grateful Ones?

Psalm 65 Luke 17:11-19

### Luke 17:11-19

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' 14When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. 15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' 19Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

This is the word of the Lord

When we lived in Anchorage, I was invited to go on a hunting trip by our friend Bill. To get to our destination, we had to fly in Bill's small plane, which is the only means of transportation to many places in that state. Therefore, a lot of people learn to fly, like our friend Bill, who is an excellent pilot. So we flew out to Iliamna, way out west of Anchorage, traversing mountain passes and negotiating strong side winds. After safely landing the plane in the wind (practically sideways!), and my commenting on his great skill as a pilot, Bill said, "The most important thing about a safe landing is the attitude of the plane." I didn't know airplanes could have an attitude! So I said, don't you mean *altitude*? "No," he

explained. “The **attitude** has to do with the disposition of the plane in the air. If the attitude is too high, or tilted one way, the plane will come down with a severe bounce. If the attitude is too low or tilted the wrong way, the plane may go out of control because of excessive landing speed. Plus, he said, the nose of the plane has to be pointed in the right direction in windy conditions.” What he said next is what really got my attention. He said “*The trick is to get the right attitude in spite of atmospheric conditions.*” Ponder that for a while! The trick is to get the right attitude in spite of atmospheric conditions. I thought to myself, that’ll preach!

Even Alaska bush pilots are good theologians! What a great principle for life and faith: getting the right attitude in spite of our conditions or circumstances. Attitude is everything. A right attitude can bring hope, create well-being and potentially create positive change in the world. And a bad attitude can do the opposite. A right attitude can change the course of a person’s life.

Here is a little poem, in the form of a limerick, which describes the importance of attitude:

*One ship drives east and other west  
with the selfsame winds that blow.  
Tis the set of the sails and not the gales  
which direct the way it will go.*

*Like the winds of the sea are the ways of each day  
as we voyage along through life;  
tis the set of the soul that determines its goal,  
and not the calm or the strife.*

Attitude is everything. This morning I'd like to talk about having an attitude of gratitude. This is what's behind the question(s) Jesus asks in response to the leper returning to give thanks. In this account, he doesn't ask a question directly to a person; rather, he puts a question out into the open air for everyone to hear, and think about.

In this account, the healing of the lepers is almost a sideline event. It's not the main event like it is in most other accounts of Jesus healings. Here, Jesus heals the 10 lepers without fanfare, with a simple word to them to go show themselves to the priests. He has them do that so they can be declared ritually clean by the priests and re-enter society as full human beings; so, sending them to the priests was a grace to them. They would experience a ritual that welcomed them (or welcomed them back) to community and humanity.

The healing isn't the main event, though. The main even here is the gratitude shown by one of the lepers. And by the way, it was the *outsider* who returned to show gratitude. Jews hated Samaritans and considered them

mongrels; so, Jesus commending a Samaritan in that day would be like him being in Israel *today* saying, “Was no one else found to return thanks except this Palestinian?” It would’ve raised a lot of eyebrows. And a lot more could be said about Jesus commending a foreigner, and a despised one at that, but we’ll save it for another time. There is lots of material in the gospels about that—about Jesus crossing boundaries and borders and breaking conventional norms to welcome strangers and outsiders.

Notice in this account that expressing gratitude is not a *condition* of being healed, or of retaining their healing. Jesus didn’t tell them to say please and thank you, and *then* they’ll get, or keep, their healing. The other nine who went their way didn’t lose their healing because they failed to return to give thanks. All of them were healed, and remained healed, as they went to the priests. So, there was no magic formula that brought on, or kept, the healing. Just a cry for mercy from them, and Jesus showing mercy to all of them. The difference is, Jesus declares to this one who turned back to give thanks, “Your faith has made you *well*.” Your faith has made you *well*. The word here is also translated, “whole.” This is reflected in the Old King James: “Thy faith has made thee whole.” It’s the same word and principle in John 5 when Jesus asks a sick man, “Do you want to be well?” (again, KJV: “Wilt thou be made whole.”). Jesus didn’t ask him, “Do you

want to be healed?” He saw something in him that indicated that he needed more than just a prescription from Dr. Jesus, or a miracle from him that would take his physical illness away. He wanted to know if this man wanted to be well, in a holistic way.

Similarly, Jesus didn't say to the Samaritan who returned, “Your faith has *healed* you.” He had *already* received the healing. He says, your faith has made you *well*. This particular word speaks to an internal wholeness as well as an external, physical wellness; it represents a holistic sense of well-being.

What Jesus is saying to this man is that his gratitude created a deeper and fuller wellbeing for him. Because... gratitude can do that. It can make us well. It can make us well internally, and it can make things go well *for* us and *around* us, because gratitude creates its own vibe, and environment, where we and those around us can thrive.

Author Melody Beattie says this about gratitude: “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. It turns problems into gifts, failures into successes, mistakes into important events, and the unexpected into perfect

timing. It can turn an existence into a real life, and disconnected situations into important and beneficial lessons. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates vision for tomorrow.” I love this so much.

The word that comes to mind when I read this is, abundance. Abundance is not something we acquire; it’s something we tune into, through gratitude. Abundance is around us, and when we tune into it, through gratitude, our hearts swell and our faith increases. Psalm 65 is a good example of someone seeing abundance all around! There is that sense of a lush earth, with all kinds of bounty from the harvest, overflowing with goodness. It’s a great psalm for this time of year. And the abundance spoken of in the psalm is spiritual as well as material—God’s saving help and God’s bounty from the earth.

Again, gratitude can make us well, and has potential to create wellness around us. There is evidence—scientific evidence—that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about when he says “Your faith has made you well” to someone who expressed gratitude. A web site called WebMD (a great web site for medical and health information and updates and reports and articles). A while back WebMD published an article titled “Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude” that was written and produced by a medical *group*. The essay cited hundreds of

years of philosophic and religious teaching urging gratitude, and then cited evidence that gratitude is a stress reducer, that grateful people tend to be more hopeful, and there are links between gratitude and a stronger immune system.

So, our mothers were right when she made us send thank-you cards for birthday gifts!

The basic *Christian response to God* is gratitude: gratitude for the gift of life, gratitude for this beautiful world, gratitude for the dear people God has given us to enrich and grace our lives, and gratitude that we can *be* one of those dear people to others. The basic *Christian experience* is gratitude to God for God's love in Jesus Christ and the accompanying gift of hopeful confidence and the wholeness and wellness that comes with it, regardless of our worldly circumstances or condition.

One of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, has said that there are really only three prayers: "Help!" and "Thanks" and "Wow!" That's actually the title of one of her books. Now, she will acknowledge that prayer is much more than that, so much deeper and more enriching as we listen and converse with God and commune with God and experience God's peace, but she's onto something. In its simplest form, this is prayer: help, thanks, and wow.

Jesus' question here is "Where are the others? Where are the grateful ones? Why didn't the others return to say thank you like this foreigner?" Those are good questions. I'm glad Jesus doesn't fuss too much over the others who didn't come back, and focused mostly on the one who did. But it's worth taking a brief moment to wonder: why *didn't* the other ones say thank you?

Perhaps they were so overjoyed that it didn't occur to them to do that, and they just wanted to hurry to get to the priests—like a kid opening a Christmas or birthday gift; they're just too excited to say thank you in the moment; they just want to play with their new gadget.

Or perhaps their lack of gratitude shows a utilitarianism—the old God-as-vending-machine attitude where I say or do something to get God's attention so he'll do something, and perhaps God comes through with what I want, like putting in the money and out comes the soda or snack. I don't thank a vending machine for giving me my snack or beverage, right? Perhaps that was their attitude.

Maybe they got too busy talking with each other that they didn't think to turn and say thanks.



Anyway, who knows why the other 9 didn't return to show their gratitude. I mention it, because it gives me pause to reflect on why I am not more grateful, more often. Giving thanks seems like a "well, duh" response to God's blessings, but it's easy to forget and just go on my way, because my mind gets cluttered, or I take God's gifts for granted.

The point is, here, that *someone* turned back, and this person became the beneficiary of an even deeper sense of wellness.

This account raises for me another question, and perhaps this has crossed your mind this morning: what about those who cry out for mercy, like the lepers, and aren't healed? All I can say is it's a mystery why some experience healing and others don't, yet no matter what the outcome or the situation, everyone is still cherished by God, and a person's faith can still make them *well* because of gratitude, even if they continue to struggle. The Bible bears witness to that clearly, and often. Not everyone is healed, physically, but *everyone* receives God's attention and care, and *everyone* can take steps toward God in an attitude of gratitude, and become whole persons.

1Thess.5:16-18: *"Rejoice always pray continually give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* Ever wonder what

God's will is for your life? Here is one place where it's stated explicitly in the Bible!

We can give thanks in all circumstances, even if the circumstances are hard.

19<sup>th</sup> century pastor and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher: *"If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there are particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet and sweep through it, and the almost invisible particles would be drawn to it. The unthankful heart, like my fingers in the sand, discovers no mercies. But let the thankful heart sweep through the day, as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find some heavenly blessings."*

Practicing gratitude changes *persons*, as we've been talking about. And, it can change the entire character of a church. When each of us practices gratitude, we come to worship, not just to *receive* something but to *give* thanks and praise to God. "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise" says the psalmist in psalm 100. The *mission* of the church then changes from a sense of obligation, to grateful hearts and hands at work and worship, serving and blessing *others*. *Stewardship* is transformed from mere fundraising to the glad gratitude of joyful givers who want to share God's blessings. And then our faith makes *us, as a*

*church*, well—a whole and vital community, radiating love and joy. And acceptance... of what God is doing among us; acceptance of ourselves as God's children; and acceptance of others in Jesus' name. Anyone who returns to give thanks is welcome, commended, and included in the community of those for whom it is well with their soul.

We Praise You, O God, Our Redeemer, Creator