

“An Attitude of Gratitude” (Luke 17:11-19)

Have you ever gone out of your way to do something nice for someone only to have that person be unappreciative?

- Have you ever let another car pull out in front of you, only to have that driver pretend like you were invisible?
- Have you ever spent all day preparing a meal for your family, only to have your husband grunt and your children complain?
- Have you ever worked long hours on a particularly taxing and time consuming project at work, only to have your boss not even look at it or pass it over as little importance?
- Have you ever gone out and purchased four of the Christmas gifts that your child requested, only to have your son or daughter unhappy because you forgot the fifth on the list?

All of us can relate to these scenarios. Yet, these are minor issues compared to what Jesus experienced in Luke 17:11-19.¹ Our story begins in 17:11. Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem (cf. 9:51). He is going there to subject Himself to ungrateful men and women and to die on a cross. On His “Jerusalem Journey,” Jesus “**was passing between Samaria and Galilee.**” Luke includes this geographical note to inform us that this account took place in a racially mixed area (cf. 17:16).²

Our story continues in 17:12: “**As He [Jesus] entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him.**” On His way to the cross, ten leprous men interrupted Jesus’ journey. In biblical times, leprosy was a terrible thing. However, we’re not exactly sure what biblical leprosy was. The Greek word for leprosy is a general word that encompasses any skin disease.³ Whatever it was, once a person caught it, it was considered incurable, and those diagnosed with leprosy were banned from society. They had to spend their days alone with other lepers, outside the city walls (Lev 13:45-46). They were dependent upon family members, or those in the village who had pity on them, to bring them food. Furthermore, a leper was required to wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face, and cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” Lepers were outcasts, the social dregs of society. So they formed their own society of the “unclean,” the “untouchables.”

In 17:13, these lepers “**raised their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’**” The phrase “**have mercy on us**” is a request to heal them.⁴ These lepers asked for “**mercy**”—that which they did not deserve. They called out to Jesus, the way everyone should: with empty hands, offering Him nothing. Notice, they addressed the Lord as “**Jesus**” and “**Master.**” The personal name “**Jesus**” means “the Lord is my salvation.” The word translated “**Master**” is that of a “chief commander” (cf. Luke 5:5). These men know that Jesus is in command of even disease and death, and they trust Him to help them. Now Jesus could have, at this point, said, “Men, I’m on a mission. Don’t you realize I’m going to Jerusalem where I’m going to be killed?” Jesus could have thought only of His near suffering, yet, in compassion, He responded graciously to the lepers’ request. He does this because He longs to be asked.

My little daughter, Jena, is a candy-aholic. She can eat candy until her little body is about to burst. However, when I allow her to have candy, I often allot it one morsel at a time. This past Friday, Jena asked for a miniature box of *Hot Tamales*. I granted her wish, but I gave her one tamale at a time. I did this because I wanted her to return to me and ask me for another. I love it when Jena comes and sits on my lap and looks at me with those beautiful brown eyes and whispers, “Daddy, can I have a tamale?” I melt. I’m putty in her hands. (She knows it and mom knows it.) Now if our relationship was based around candy, I would be disappointed. But I love it when Jena asks. Jesus feels the same way. He loves it when His kids come to Him, plop down in His lap, and simply ask. Of course, our relationship should entail more than asking, but Jesus loves it when we call out to Him!

After the ten lepers made their request, Jesus said, **“Go and show yourselves to the priests”** (17:14a). At first glance, you might think that Jesus is putting them off. Yet, this is not so. Jesus fully intends to heal them, but He intends to do it in keeping with the demands of the law. The significance of the priests in Jesus’ instruction is that only priests, according to Jewish law, can declare a person healed of leprosy—clean, and fit to re-enter society (Lev 14). If Jesus hadn’t sent the lepers to the priests, no one would have believed the miracle had really taken place.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, how do you suppose these lepers felt when Jesus said, **“Go and show yourselves to the priests?”** Go show what to the priests? They were still lepers. They didn’t have anything to show that the priests would want to see. In fact, the last thing a priest wants to see is ten smelly, disheveled, deformed, wretched lepers. I wonder if someone said, “Why bother?” After all, “once a leper, always a leper.” There were sores everywhere, deformed arms and fingers bitten off by rodents. You could smell the disease a quarter-mile away.

No doubt, the lepers were hoping that Jesus was going to touch them and pronounce their healing! They probably weren’t expecting Him to give them a command. Fortunately, the lepers understood what Jesus was doing. Normally, a command to show oneself to a priest followed a cure (5:14; cf. Lev 13:49; 14:2-3). These men knew that you didn’t go before the priests unless you’d been healed. So when Jesus told them to go, He was assuring them that when they saw the priests they would be pronounced **“CLEAN”**—a part of the community. No longer outcasts. They would be able to return to their family once again. So with nothing to lose, the men turned and made their way toward the priests.

Luke declares: **“And it came about that as they were going, they were cleansed”**⁵ (17:14b). There came a point, as they began to obey Jesus, that their healing took place all of a sudden (cf. 5:12-16). Jesus healed them from a distance (cf. 2 Kgs 5:10-14).⁶ Had they disbelieved Jesus and laughed at His command as illogical, they wouldn’t have been healed. But they believed Him and received their healing as a result. They were healed as they went. Not before. Not after. This means that when they left to go to the priests, they still had leprosy. But they chose to believe. Jesus was testing their faith and obedience. If they really regarded Him as their **“Master,”** they should obey Him. The lepers’ response would have taught the disciples, and everyone else present, the importance of trusting and obeying Jesus’ word (cf. 6:10; Matt 12:13; Mark 3:5).⁷

Now, however, comes the critical part of this passage. In 17:15-16, Luke writes, **“Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him.”**⁸ What a response! Please don’t read this too quickly.

- ***First, this lone leper turned back.*** On the most exciting day of his life, this leper stopped in his tracks and turned back. Luke writes, **“Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back.”** There is an element of suspense in this verse. **“Now...when he saw.”** There was an immediate, instinctual response on the part of this lone leper. He turned back because he recognized that he had received mercy and this reality overwhelmed him.

Far too long the “me generation” has crept into our thinking. It is one of the main reasons why so many in the church are weak and anemic—and ungrateful. Our gratitude to God will almost certainly be in proportion to our sense of feeling unworthily blessed.⁹ The modern American seldom pauses to give thanks for the simple blessings of life. One reason is that we are used to having so much. We simply assume that we will have all the good things of life. Another reason is that it hurts our pride to be grateful. We do not want to admit that God is the Provider of all good things. We are simply His stewards. Being thankful requires humility and faith in God. When we have these, we can be grateful.¹⁰

- ***Second, he glorified God with a loud voice.***¹¹ To glorify God is to exalt Him, to let others know how great He is. This leper had what our Pentecostal brothers call a “Shouting Session.” He must have said, “YEA, Jesus! You did it! You made a way out of no way! You healed me from the inside out. There’s no one like You. You are the great God. You are my all-powerful Healer!” All ten lepers called out loudly to ask for mercy, but only this leper returns to offer loud praise. While ten men prayed, only one praised. This tells us something about human nature. Most people are far more prone to pray in a time of need than to praise God when He meets that need. We will call out to God when we get desperate enough. We will make promises to Him. God, if You come through just this once, I will serve You with my life. Yet, when He does come through, we quickly go on with life. What a travesty! I pray that we learn to glorify God as loud as we clamor to Him with all our requests!
- ***Third, he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet.*** This leper throws himself at Jesus’ feet as a sign of utter humility (cf. 5:12; 8:41; 18:11; 22:17, 19; Acts 5:10; 28:15). The Masai tribe in West Africa has an unusual way of saying thank you: They bow, put their forehead on the ground, and say, “My head is in the dirt.” Another African tribe expresses gratitude by sitting for a long time in front of the hut of the person who did the favor and saying, literally, “I sit on the ground before you.” These Africans understand what thanksgiving is and why it’s difficult for us: At its core, thanksgiving is an act of humility. It acknowledges our debt to the other person.¹² The one leper gave thanks in a way that would embarrass most people. We must learn to do the same.
- ***Finally, this lone leper gave Jesus thanks.*** This leper manifested an attitude of gratitude. It would have been logical for this man to have followed the other men and gone to the temple, but he first came to the Lord Jesus with his sacrifice of praise (cf. Heb 13:15). This pleased the Lord more than all the sacrifices the other men offered at the temple, even though they were obeying the law. Why? Because instead of going to the priests, this man became a “priest” and he built his altar at the feet of Jesus.¹³ What a beautiful response! Jesus receives his thanks graciously.¹⁴

Verse 16 includes a parenthetical statement that is very important: “**And he was a Samaritan.**”¹⁵ Why is this fact included? What is so significant about this leper being a Samaritan? Jews hated Samaritans. They were called “half-breeds” because these Jews intermarried with Gentiles. And, if that wasn’t bad enough, they defected from the religious roots that the Jews held so dear. Therefore, the thought that God would ever heal a Samaritan never even crossed a Jew’s mind. Yet, during His earthly ministry, Jesus elevated Samaritans.¹⁶ The woman at the well in John 4 was a Samaritan as well as the people Jesus preached to later in that same chapter. Jesus rebuked James and John for wanting to call down fire on the Samaritans in Luke 9, and He even honored a Samaritan for his compassion in Luke 10. Then, in Acts 1, as Jesus was about to ascend to His Father, He challenged His disciples to witness in Samaria (1:8).

Do you see the point? Jesus loves all people everywhere. He’s not like us. He doesn’t have racial preferences. He doesn’t concern Himself with people’s income or social class. He had no problem mixing with the poor, the sick, and the irreligious. He loves freely and unconditionally. On the other hand, we tend to dislike anyone different from us. This isn’t restricted just to skin color. We dislike the attractive, the unattractive, the overweight, the underweight, the sociable, the unsociable, the intelligent, the unintelligent, the rich, the poor; the list goes on and on. It all depends upon who you are and what prejudices you hold. But aren’t you glad that Jesus isn’t like that?

This man was from the wrong race, he had the wrong religion, he had the worst possible disease, and Jesus healed him! In these nine verses, Luke has gone out of his way to point out that this lone leper who expressed gratitude to Jesus was a Samaritan—a foreigner. Why is this significant? Because one of the dominant themes in Luke’s gospel is that the Gospel is for all people—even Samaritans and Gentiles. In some cases, those most sensitive to the Gospel came from outside the Jewish nation (cf. John 1:11).

In 17:17-18, Jesus responds to this Samaritan by asking him, **“Were there not 10 cleansed? But the 9—where are they? Were none found who turned back to give glory to God, except this foreigner?”**¹⁷ The nine lepers got what they wanted and left. Jesus performed a mighty miracle for them and they said, “Thanks, Lord, I can take it from here.” They’re like children who eat their fill and then run away from the dinner table without a word of thanks. “We’re full now. Let’s go out and play.” Does this sound like your kids? Does this sound like you? I think this is the particular sin of those raised in the church. We have so little sense of what God has done for us. Often, we don’t love the Lord very much or feel grateful for His blessings.¹⁸

This whole story is a picture of life as it really is. First, it is a picture of the abundant grace of God. This is a cure by wholesale—a whole hospital healed with only a word, ten at a time. It is a vast miracle. Second, it is a picture of prevalent ingratitude. Nine out of ten people will probably forget every blessing they ever receive. Third, it is a picture of unexpected grace. Grateful hearts often pop up where you least expect them. (Luke doesn’t say so directly, but I think he implies that the other nine were Jews. If that’s so, then what this story really means is that those who should have been most grateful weren’t. And the one man who shouldn’t have come back did.)

These two verses tell us something very interesting about Jesus. Thanking Him for blessings we receive is very important to Him. Jesus was very much aware that only one returned to give Him thanks. ***Jesus notices gratitude—and ingratitude.*** Now, I don’t know about you, but as I studied through this passage, I couldn’t help but be incensed over the ingratitude of the nine lepers. I could not understand how, after having their earthly existence transformed, they could not return a simple thanks. As I read this passage, I thought to myself: If I had been one of those other nine lepers, I would have thrown myself at Jesus’ feet and praised Him all the daylong. I would have even offered Him the rest of my life.

But before I judged these lepers too harshly, I began to ask myself: “Keith, what is your own gratitude quotient?”¹⁹ As I considered my own GQ, I had to admit that too often I am content to enjoy the gift but I forget the Giver. I am quick to pray but slow to praise. All at once, it struck me: If I had been one of the ten lepers, I think I would have been one of the nine. If I had been one of the lepers who had been healed by Jesus, I probably would have waited to see if the cure was real or if it would really last. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if I may have even said, “I would have gotten well anyway” or, “I was already much improved.” As I wrestled with my own propensity towards ingratitude, I realized I am often an ungrateful Christian. Don’t get me wrong, I may not look ungrateful, I may not even act ungrateful, but the Lord knows that often I have been discontent and unsatisfied.

Though an attitude of gratitude is the work of the Holy Spirit, it also comes as a result of personal effort on our part. We must cultivate the habit of always giving thanks in everything (1 Thess 5:18). Here are some practical ways you can cultivate an attitude of gratitude:

- Expand your mealtime expression of thanks to include other blessings beyond the food.
- Begin and end the day with a time of thanksgiving. Pick three things you’re most thankful for.
- Be grateful for little things (Luke 16:10a). If you are grateful in small things, even in a small way, you will naturally express gratitude in great things.
- Write down the prayer requests you make to God; then keep those answered requests on your list until you feel you have adequately thanked God for His answer. Along with written prayer requests, it can be helpful to keep a list of significant blessings for which you are thankful.
- Write “thank you” notes to express gratitude and appreciation.
- Consider what you possess rather than what you lack (Phil 4:11). The less you concentrate on future needs, the more you will enjoy present privileges.

Gratitude is not just a nice addition to a generally good character. It is indispensable to Christian character.²⁰ Gratitude is the highest duty of the believer and the supreme virtue, the fountain from which all other blessings flow. Ingratitude is leprosy of the soul. It eats away on the inside, destroys our happiness, cripples our joy, withers our compassion, paralyzes our praise, and renders us numb to all the blessings of God.²¹

You may have noticed we have not yet touched on the final verse of our passage. In 17:19, Luke shares an incredible truth with us: By returning to Jesus, this former leper received something far greater than physical healing.²² He was also saved from his sins. Jesus said, **“Your faith has made you well”** (or lit., “Your faith has saved you”).²³ The Samaritan’s friends were declared clean by the priests, but this man was declared saved by the Son of God!²⁴ The greatest lesson we can learn from this passage is: ***To appreciate God’s many gifts, first thank Him for His greatest gift.***²⁵ As we continually exhibit an attitude of gratitude for our eternal salvation, we will find a whole lot to be thankful for:

- Opportunities for spiritual growth
- The availability of the Bible
- The instruction and fellowship of our church
- The abundance of helpful Christian books
- Opportunities for ministry and service
- Godly parents
- A godly wife
- Children who know Christ and are growing in Him
- Health of our family
- Political freedom
- Material provision for family needs

Would you please open your Bibles to Colossians 2:6-7 and with your eyes open and fixed on this text, would you pray with me? Father, my prayer for us is: “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.”

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1. Why does Luke make the point that the lepers weren't healed until they started to obey Jesus' command (17:14b)? Why is obedience important to Jesus? Do you consider yourself obedient to the "Master"? What areas of your life demonstrate wholehearted submission to Him? What areas still have room for growth? Do you know a believer who exemplifies obedience? What is it about this person that you appreciate? Have you expressed your gratitude to this person for his/her Christian walk? Will you make a commitment to do so today through personal contact, phone, email, or a handwritten card or letter?
2. What was it about the thankful leper's response that showed his thankfulness (17:15-16)? When you are thankful to Jesus, how do you respond? Are there times when you are overwhelmed with praise and gratitude? Describe such a time. How long did this carry you in your spiritual life? What can you do to extend your gratitude quotient? Please be specific with your applications.
3. What was Jesus' attitude toward the thankful leper (17:19)? What was His attitude toward the other nine lepers (17:17-18)? Why do you think Jesus notices both gratitude and ingratitude? What does this tell you about the importance of gratitude as it relates to Jesus?
4. How do you feel when a person is especially thankful to you? Can you think of a time when someone gushed gratitude to you? Do you have a memory of a lack of gratitude and appreciation on another person's part? What lessons did you learn from this that you will not repeat?
5. Eric Hoffer writes, "The hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings." Why is it so easy to forget to thank God for His blessings? What blessings are you most thankful for today? Where do you tend to lack thanksgiving? What will you praise the Lord for more faithfully this week that you have neglected to notice in the past?
6. Who is the one person you could tell today about the great things God has done for you? How can you encourage other people in your life to cultivate an attitude of gratitude?

What are the enemies of gratitude?²⁶

- Complaining—Why can't something good happen to me?
- Taking God's blessings for granted—What have you done for me lately?
- Lack of faith—What if God doesn't come through?
- Pessimism—It's not all good.
- Selfishness—Why does that person have more than I have?

Notes

¹ Liefeld writes, “Not only is this narrative peculiar to Luke, but it also stresses several characteristically Lukan themes. Jerusalem is the goal of Jesus’ journey (cf. 9:51; 13:33); Jesus has mercy on social outcasts; he conforms to Jewish norms by requiring that the lepers go for the required priestly declaration of health (cf. Lev. 14); faith and healing should bring praise to God (cf. 18:43; Acts 3:8-9); and the grace of God extends beyond Judaism, with Samaritans receiving special attention (cf. 10:25-37).” Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke*: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), Electronic Ed.

² This prepares us for the punch line in Luke 17:16.

³ Gk. *lepros*: “pertaining to having a serious skin disorder, with a bad skin disease” (see Matt 8:2; 10:8; 11:5; 26:6; Mark 1:40; 14:3; Luke 4:27; 7:22). See BDAG, Electronic Ed.

⁴ See Luke 16:24; 18:38-39; Matt 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:31-32; Mark 10:47-49. NET Study Notes.

⁵ The Greek construction uses the preposition *en*, which can mean “in, when, while, during.” Literally, “in the going, they were cleansed.” The word “cleansed” is in the aorist tense, which signifies action at a single point of time in the past tense, rather than action over a period of time as would have been indicated by the imperfect tense.

⁶ In all biblical history only two people had been cured of leprosy: Miriam, who had leprosy for seven days as a punishment for speaking against Moses’ leadership (Num 12:9-15), and Naaman, general of the army of Aram, a heathen from Damascus (2 Kgs 5). When he obeyed Elijah’s instruction to wash seven times in the Jordan River he was healed. Healing a leper had not been done in Israel for 700 years, and was thought to be an earmark of the Messianic Age (Luke 7:22), when leprosy would no longer afflict people.

⁷ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Luke* (<http://www.sonlight.com/constable/notes/pdf/luke.pdf>, 2005), 202.

⁸ This is the only place in the NT where Jesus is thanked rather than God (cf. Luke 18:11; 22:17, 19; Acts 27:35; 28:15). Robert H. Stein, *Luke*: NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 434-435.

⁹ R.T. Kendall, *Just Say Thanks: Cultivating Gratitude Deepens Intimacy With God* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2005), 26.

¹⁰ Preaching Today Citation: Richard B. Douglass in Quotable Quotations. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, no. 17.

¹¹ Stein notes that this is a favorite Lukan expression (cf. Luke 4:33; 8:28; 19:37; 23:23, 46; Acts 7:57, 60; 8:7; 14:10; 16:28; 26:24). Stein, *Luke*, 434.

¹² Steven J. Cole, *How to Respond to God’s Blessings* (Luke 17:11-19): <http://www.fcfonline.org/site/content/1/sermons/101799M.pdf>, 9

¹³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*: Vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 245.

¹⁴ Notice that Jesus didn’t tell any of them to come back and thank Him. He told them to show themselves to the priests, but He didn’t tell them to return. Gratitude can never be solicited. It can only be freely given. No one can make another thankful.

¹⁵ See the NET: “He fell with his face to the ground at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. (Now he was a Samaritan.)”

¹⁶ This observation concurs with several other indictments of the Jews living in Jesus’ day. Jesus points out in the Parable of the Tenants (Luke 20:9-19) that, by and large, God’s people have rejected His appointed Son. John’s gospel begins with the sad observation: “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:11-12).

¹⁷ Constable writes, “Jesus’ questions highlighted the ingratitude of the nine other lepers who were Jews (v. 18). They also made the point that Luke wanted to stress by recording this incident. The Jews had more knowledge about Messiah and His coming than foreigners. They should have recognized who Jesus was and expressed their gratitude as well. Their lack of responsiveness was typical of the Jews in Jesus’ day (cf. 15:3-10). In closing, Jesus clarified that it was the man’s faith in Him that led to his obedience and was responsible for his restoration, not just his obedience. Jesus was not implying that the other nine lepers lacked faith. They also believed in Him (17:13).” Constable, *Notes on Luke*, 202.

¹⁸ “Our biggest problem in the church today is this vast majority of Sunday morning Christians who claim to have known the Master’s cure and who return not [at other times] to thank Him by presence, prayer, testimony and support of His church. In fact, the whole Christian life is one big “Thank You,” the living expression of our gratitude to God for His goodness. But we take Him for granted and what we take for granted we never take seriously.” Preaching Today citation: Vance Havner in “The Vance Havner Quote Book”: *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, no. 17.

¹⁹ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 245.

²⁰ Matthew A. Thomas, *Gratitude: Key to Wholeness: Have you noticed what God has done for you lately?* *Discipleship Journal* 31 (Jan/Feb 1986): <http://www.navpress.com/EPubs/DisplayArticle/1/1.31.13.html>.

²¹ Dr. Ray Pritchard, Where are the Nine? (Luke 17:11-19):

http://www.calvarymemorial.com/pastor_ray/sermons/read_sermon.asp?id=567

²² Luke appears to use the term “save” in three primary ways. First, the term can describe a physical healing and even an exorcism (cf. 8:36, 48, 50). Second, the term can refer to the saving of one’s physical life, as when Jesus was challenged to come down from the cross and save Himself (23:35, 37, 39; cf. 9:24). Third, the term is used, perhaps most often, of eternal salvation (7:48, 50; 8:12; 18:25-26; 19:10). In some cases, it would appear that there is a blending of the first and third uses, so that physical healing and spiritual salvation are both depicted by the term “saved” (e.g. 8:36, 48). See Robert Deffinbaugh, *Luke: The Gospel of the Gentiles* 54 “Putting Faith in Perspective (Luke 17:5-19),” (http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1122, 1996).

²³ These are the same words Jesus spoke to the repentant woman who anointed His feet in Luke 7:50 (cf. 8:50).

²⁴ See also Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*: NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 627; I. Howard Marshall, *Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*: NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 652.

²⁵ James writes, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above [*anōthen*], coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (Jas 1:17). Interestingly, the phrase “from above” translates the Greek word *anōthen* that is also used by Jesus in His discussion with Nicodemus on how to be “born again” (John 3:3, 7). The word *anōthen* can mean either “again” or “above.”

²⁶ The outline for this structure is taken from Jay Dennis, *The Jesus Habits: Exercising the Spiritual Disciplines of Jesus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 78-79.