

AUGUST TURKEY
Luke 17:11-19

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Thank-you notes. Do you have your thank you notes written yet? A question that plagues brides and haunts graduates.

Why is it such a chore to write thank-you notes? Can anyone tell me that? If someone does something really nice for you, and you have a heart of gratitude, why wouldn't you rush for paper and pen to express your attitude of gratitude to your kind friend?

But it doesn't work that way. We don't want to spend the time and energy saying thanks. Ridiculous when you think about it.

Our own Jon Mark Beilue wrote an article in the *Amarillo Globe-News* entitled "Notes of thanks: 1st move as adults" (May 31, 2009). In his humorous, but painfully true diatribe, he challenged May graduates to man-up and write their thank-you notes for graduation gifts. He writes, "Did you think sending a graduation invitation to someone you couldn't pick out of a lineup at gunpoint just to get a gift didn't have strings attached?" Of course, they all do. It's the thank-you note, my friend. And here's some cold early reality of the Real World – your momma ain't writing them. You are. I suggest you get cracking."

Serving as a testimonial, Jon Mark related his horrific experience decades ago when his mother browbeat him into submission nightly until he wrote all of his thank you notes. She was going to take away tuition money. He had to write every last note of gratitude.

Why is it so hard to simply say "thanks," so much so that Jon Mark compared receiving graduation gifts to making a deal with the devil. May's river of riches turned into a dry creek bed his graduation year when he had to express his gratitude. [When I chose to use Jon Mark as an element of ridicule, I was truthfully not aware that he was saying the offertory prayer this morning.]

I looked protocol up in Emily Post's *Etiquette, The Blue Book of Social Usage*, printed in 1965. The original went all the way back to 1922. The 1965 revision of the book that tells you how to do everything properly in the 1960s. We read, "**In return for the many presents showered upon the happy bride, there is a correspondence task that may not be evaded. On a sheet of note paper, not a folded visiting card, and in her own handwriting, she must send a separate letter for each present she receives and, if humanly possible, she writes each letter of thanks on the day the present arrives.**"

Oh my word, you talk about late. You're a lot later than you thought, newlyweds. You're supposed to write the thank-you note on the day you received the gift. Emily Post warns, "**If she**

does not, they soon get ahead of her and her whole honeymoon is taken up with note writing.”
Now, that’s never a good thing.

“It would not be possible to overemphasize the inexcusable rudeness of the bride who sends a printed, or even engraved, card of thanks for wedding presents sent her. Whoever devised this flagrant affront to the traditions of common decency was, obviously, more concerned with making sales to stationers than with the ordinary precepts of polite behavior.” (Emily Post, *Etiquette*, p. 355)

The strange thing about thank-you notes: none of us like to write them, but all of us like to get them. Isn’t it nice when somebody acknowledges your time, effort, and energy?

But the bad news for today’s sermon is that it is not just Jon Mark’s mother and Emily Post who expect you to be grateful. God also expects you to acknowledge your gratitude. To acknowledge your gratitude for the good things God brings into your life. And when He doesn’t receive the thanks, He wants to know what’s wrong. Why no gratitude.

Do you realize that the Christian church sets aside only one Sunday a year to talk about giving thanks? Of course, in November. That’s remarkable, given the emphasis on thanks and a heart of thankfulness and gratitude that we find in scripture. Why, there are so many thanksgiving psalms that scholars have named a whole category of psalms “Psalms of Thanksgiving” (Psalm 30, 34, 41, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138). And Paul begins his letters with several routine elements, not the least of which is a word of thanks.

Somehow we have missed the mark in failing to realize how important it is to have a spirit of thanks. Maybe we need to have turkey in August. Maybe we need to have Thanksgiving all year long.

Eugene Peterson says:

Wonder-induced gratitude is the most fundamental of human responses, the emotion most congruent with life. Johnny Bergman was a young man in his congregation. He and his wife were enthusiastic participants, but then the weeds of worldly care choked their young faith. They acquired children; they became suddenly wealthy and their lives filled up with boats and cars, house-building and social engagements. They were in worship less and less frequently and then not at all. After a two-year absence, on a bright winter Epiphany Sunday, Johnny was there again. Surprised to see him, Peterson said, “Johnny! What brought you to worship today?” He said, “I awoke this morning feeling so good, so blessed, so alive, so created, I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think of to say it adequately. I wanted to say it to Jesus.” (Eugene Peterson, “Birthing,” *Christian Century*, January 6-13, 1999, p. 27)

Jesus expects you to say it. And Jesus looks for us to approach Him with hearts of gratitude.

Verse 11

In our passage, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, making His way to the place of His death. As He was traveling south, He was between Samaria and Galilee.

Verse 12

Luke does not tell us exactly where this miracle takes place. But he describes what would not be considered an unusual event. As Jesus made His way into a small village, ten leprous men stood at some length from Jesus and shouted for His help.

Now, leprosy was a terrible, microbacterial disease that, until as recently as 1960, was regarded as incurable. Today it's called Hansen's Disease. Leprosy is given more attention in scripture than any other malady.

If someone had the symptoms of a leper – sores, loss of hair, numbness of feeling – he or she was to report to the priest for inspection. The priests acted something like a health inspector of the day. The disease was so highly contagious that the leper became a social outcast, banished from society. A permanent quarantine until symptoms are clear – which was the rare exception.

Look at Leviticus 13:1-3 and 45-46.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, “When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons the priests. And the priest shall look at the mark on the skin of the body, and if the hair in the infection has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is an infection of leprosy; when the priest has looked at him, he shall pronounce him unclean”... “As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

Probably the most haunting of all are the last words of verse 46: “His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” These men had to leave their families, their jobs, their homes, their all. In a real sense, they were dead to their families, no longer a part of the things which the family did. They stayed around the outskirts of the village in hopes that they could only come in. If only they could see their wives again, to have a chance to hold their children once again, all would be great.

They could only sit and wonder how their families were getting along without them, as they had the awful existence of living on the fringe of the community.

The leper had to tear his clothes as a sign that he was infected. He was to have a bare head and shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” each and every time he was nearing the village. A fearsome and condemned life. In Medieval times, a priest would often read a funeral service over a leper before he was cast out of the city, for he was sure never to return again. The miracles of Christ in curing lepers are a testimony to His compassion as well as His power. Jesus did the undoable – He healed the unhealable.

Verse 13

While the lepers had to stay away from the main of society, they stayed on the fringe in hopes that they might receive some gifts with which to meet their needs. And they had heard that a man

named Jesus had healed people of diseases. Why, it seemed as if there was nothing that Jesus could not do.

Verse 14

Jesus did not tell them they were cured. Rather, He told them to go and present themselves to the priest. Leviticus 14:2 reads, “This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing. Now he shall be brought to the priest.” The priest was to make the examination, and once he was satisfied that the disease had really been cured, he would order purification rituals to be initiated. The ceremony of cleansing lasted eight days.

When Jesus told the lepers to go to the priest, He was asking them to behave as if they were well.

Jesus, in sending them to the priest – the health inspector – was putting their faith to the test by asking them to act as though they had been cured. And as they obeyed, so it happened. As they went, they were cleansed.

On a side note, we have reached the second time in history when priests and pastors spend more time on epidemiology than theology. Your pastor and staff are spending more time on disease control than discipleship!

Verses 15-16

As they were making their way to the priest for inspection to be pronounced clean, one of the lepers realized they should go no further until he stopped and turned back to give glory and thanks to the Lord who had healed him.

Look at verse 15. He had been healed. He turned back. He glorified God. He fell on his face at the feet of Jesus, giving thanks to Him.

Should we really stop in our tracks only one time a year to give thanks to God?

We have much to be thankful for, and we don't even realize it.

Mary Pipher, author of *The Shelter of Each Other*, says that we would all be much healthier and much happier if we found ways of redefining success. She suggests that we should consider the person most successful who has watched the most sunsets with his or her whole family. In other words, true riches would be measured by how much awe we experience, how much gratitude we feel, how compelled we are to reflect back to others the goodness of the one God who is the true light. (Tod Bolsinger, “Reflecting God’s light to coworkers” thehighcalling.org, 6/17/07)

Gratitude really is life-changing, isn't it? As Cicero has said, it is the mother of all good virtues.

If you have a thankful heart, you can't be jealous.

If you have a thankful heart, you won't be covetousness.

If you have a thankful heart, you won't be looking for another God to Worship; you'll be happy with the provisions of the God of creation.

Gratitude turns denial into acceptance. Chaos into order. Confusion into clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast. A house into a home. A stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past. Brings peace to our present. And creates a vision for our future. (Melody Beattie, www.homileticsonline.com)

Once more, in this story we realize that Jesus really expects such gratitude.

Verses 17-19

“Where there not ten cleansed? But the nine – where are they? Was no one found who turned back to give glory to God, except this foreigner? Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

There is nothing worse than an ungrateful child. You've seen children of affluent families at Christmas time, opening present after present and box after box, only to look up after the fifth gift and say, “Is that all? Is that all my presents?”

Expectations in humanity so high, and gratitude and thankfulness so low.

No, there is nothing worse than an ingrate. But I wonder sometimes. Do we look like that ungrateful, spoiled brat to God? Am I His son with an unthankful heart? Do I, too, look to God after all that He has given and say, “Is that all? Is that all? Don't you have more for me?”

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1771-1810), a great-grandson of the founder of the Hasidic movement, once wrote that “When asked how things are, don't whine and grumble about your hardships. If you answer ‘Lousy,’ then God says, ‘You call this bad? I'll show you what bad really is!’ When asked how things are and, despite hardship or suffering, you answer, ‘Good,’ then God says, ‘You call this good? I'll show you what good really is!’” (Moshe Mykoff, *The Empty Chair: Finding Hope and Joy*, p 34-35)

I have a feeling that God has shown us all what good really is – not the least of which is the giving of His Son that we could have eternal life through the death and resurrection of our Savior.

So what about you? What do you have to be thankful for? If I gave you a piece of paper and a pencil, I bet you would never stop writing if you really thought about all the good things that God has given to you. And keep this in mind. There is no good gift that doesn't come from Him.

I remember as a child listening to my Grandfather Howard say the blessing, as he did every time we had a meal together. It was always a blessing of thanks in which he closed with – and I remember it to this day – “Lord, we have so many things to be thankful for that we just bow our heads and say thank you, thank you, and thank you again.”

Desmond Tutu writes:

I have always been intrigued by the story of our Lord's healing of the ten lepers. As they were on their way to show themselves to the priests who would attest to their cure, they were healed. But only one, a despised Samaritan, returned to our Lord to express his gratitude. Our Lord, surprised that only one had done so, then told this Samaritan to rise and go, for his faith had made him whole. It seems odd that Jesus should appear to repeat his cure, since the story had already recorded the healing of all ten. I have thought that perhaps this Gospel story points to a deeper leprosy in the spirit, the leprosy of ingratitude. To be unthankful, to be unappreciative, is in fact to be diseased. To cleanse our spirits of depression, of self-pity and other forms of spiritual leprosy, we have to be thankful, appreciative persons. (Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book*, p. 53)

While on a short-term mission trip, Pastor Jack Hinton from New Bern, North Carolina, was leading worship at a leper colony on the island of Tobago. There was time for one more song, so he asked if anyone had a request. A woman who had been facing away from the pulpit turned around.

"It was the most hideous face I had ever seen," Hinton said. "The woman's nose and ears were entirely gone. The disease had destroyed her lips as well. She lifted a fingerless hand in the air and asked, 'Can we sing *Count Your Many Blessings*?'"

Overcome with emotion, Hinton left the service. He was followed by a team member who said, "Jack, I guess you'll never be able to sing that song again."

"Yes, I will," he replied, "but I'll never sing it the same way." (The Pastor's Update, May 1996, The Foreign Mission Board, SBC)

These are hard days. They're hard days for you. They're hard days for me. We're all tired of it. And every day we get up – and we're sad, we're depressed, we're blue. Is that the right way? Don't we still have innumerable gifts from God for which to give thanks? Not the least of which is the fact that he has already given us his son, crucified on the cross.

I did a Covid 19 funeral this week, but it didn't change the power of the resurrection, did it. He's already given us good gifts, all the gifts we need to see it through to the other side and that which is before us.

Yes, even today, we must begin with gratitude.