

**The Rev. Al Zadig, Jr**  
**Luke 17. 11-19. (St. Michael's – June 28, 2020)**

Two weeks ago we looked at one of the hardest and most uncomfortable questions a Christian can ask – am I loving God for his own sake, or am I simply *using* God as a means to an end? That is, am I serving God simply because he deserves it, or do I obey Him to benefit myself? I might never admit this out loud, but do I perform good deeds as a way of boosting my ego (so I can think 'I'm a good person')? Do I unconsciously think that my obedience is putting God in my debt, so He has to bless me? Does the thought ever cross my mind – 'I *deserve* a good life, because I'm a good person?' Again, am I serving God for His sake, or for mine? This is one of the most important questions a Christian can ask.

The elder son in Jesus' famous parable, is a wonderful case study. He does all the right things. He works hard, he's successful, diligent, and reliable. The kind of son every parent longs for. Except for one thing. He doesn't really love his Dad. We see this when the prodigal comes home and the Dad throws a party.

With seething resentment, the elder son refuses to join in. Why? Because His future inheritance is funding the party and being depleted. And thus his heart is revealed. He's a dutiful son NOT because he loves his father, but because he loves himself, and His inheritance. And at the end of the day this paragon of duty is even more estranged from the Father than his sinful brother.

My friends, for any religious, church-going person, this parable should keep us up at night. And should drive us to our knees. Are we serving God for His own sake, or ours? Are we loving God, or are we using him? The challenge though, is that sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference. The Bible says the human heart is deceitful above all things. So how can we diagnose our true attitude?

One of the clearest barometers for spiritual health is the presence or absence of Gratitude. Gratitude is a key indicator, and it's the them of today's passage. And so this morning we're going to delve into gratitude, and we're going to look at three things:

The significance of gratitude - Why it's important.

The signs of gratitude - How can we tell if we have it.

The source of gratitude - If we don't have it, how do we get it?

So, the significance, the signs, and the source of gratitude.

First, the significance. Today's passage comes in two parts. There's a parable and a miracle. And they're connected. The parable sets up the miracle. The parable shows us what gratitude is not. The miracle shows us what gratitude is.

First, the parable. There's a master and a servant. The servant has been working hard all day in the fields. At the end of the day he comes into the house. And the parable is all about what he should expect from his master. Should the servant expect his master to say, 'You are a great servant and I'm thankful for all you've done. Come in and put your feet up and let me get you a drink'?

'NO' Jesus says in verse 8: *Will the Master not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does the master thank the servant because he did what was commanded?'*

Jesus is emphatically clear. The servant deserves nothing and should expect nothing. And this should be our approach to life. For Jesus concludes in verse 10, 'So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'

Jesus here exposes the great enemy of gratitude, which is entitlement. The feeling that we deserve good things – because we've worked hard, or been a good person. When in reality we're simply servants of the king. Have you ever noticed, when you are really upset about something, if you dig down deep into your frustration, there's a belief that you deserve better. That you're not getting a fair shake. 'I've tried so hard to be a good person. It's not fair that this happened to me. I worked so hard to succeed in life, it's not fair that this happened.'

Entitlement often lies at the heart of unhappiness. And what's insidious about entitlement is that it not only makes you angry when bad things happen, but it also sucks the joy out of the good things. There's a big difference between receiving \$20,000 as a gift, and a receiving \$20,000 because it's your annual salary. One brings joy, one brings frustration. And yet the Bible is clear, *everything* we receive is a gift. We don't deserve anything, except wrath and judgment.

But wait, you may say, I've worked really hard to get where I am. I haven't received any handouts. I'm a self-made person and I've earned what I have. Oh really? Did you choose *where* you were born? Did you choose *when* you were born? Did you choose your parents? You know, when I was in India I watched people who've spent their entire lives wading through rice paddies and pulling rickshaws. Are you saying you've worked harder than them? Is that the difference between your life and theirs? Your work ethic?

No most of us here were blessed, by the sheer grace of God, to be born in a culture where hard work could pay off so that we could flourish and thrive. All is grace. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, 'What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not?'

At the end of the day, the posture for a disciple of Jesus is that we *deserve nothing and so can be grateful for everything*. And to the degree that we surrender our

entitlement and receive everything as a gift, will be the degree to which we know joy.

And so point one, Gratitude is significant, because it's the key to joy.

Point two, the signs of gratitude. How do you know if you have it? How do you know if what you're feeling is really gratitude, and not some counterfeit – some kind of neurotic, Pollyanna escapism? Because some happy people are living in denial and can't face reality. This is an important distinction.

The second half of our passage shows us how we can know the difference. It's a simple story. Jesus is traveling between Samaria and Galilee. 10 lepers cry out to him for mercy. He tells them to go show themselves to the priests (who were the community health inspectors). All 10 are healed on the journey. And one returns to thank Jesus.

A very simple story. And we see here what true gratitude is. We see the difference between using God and loving God. For we see that one of the signs of genuine gratitude is that we turn to God, even when we don't have to, when we have nothing to gain. We worship God for no other reason than that He's good and beautiful and deserves our praise.

Because when the one leper returns, he has already received what he needs. He's received his healing. When he returns to Jesus he has nothing to gain, no agenda. Why does he do it? Because somehow, through that healing, the leper catches sight of something that is bigger and more beautiful than the healing itself. The healing is simply a signpost, pointing him to something greater. And he follows the sign and worships at the feet of Jesus.

For religious people there are at least two major reasons we can approach God. We can approach him because He's useful, or we can approach him because He's beautiful. We can approach him to help us with out agenda, or we can approach to adore him. It's like the difference between going to an art museum to help you write a college paper, and going to an art museum simply to contemplate the beauty. Do we come to God to get something, or do we come to him in thanksgiving, rejoicing in His goodness and grace?

One simple way to check this is to look at our prayers and to simply ask the question - what is the ratio between thanksgiving and petition? We should have a balance of both. But if there's vastly more petition than thanksgiving, that could be a warning light on the dash of our souls.

I'm reminded of a story about **Charles Simeon**, the great English preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One day his assistant stepped into his study, not realizing Simeon was there. The assistant froze upon seeing Simeon, kneeling on the floor with tears streaming down his face, saying 'glory, glory, glory' over and over again. My friends, that is a picture of gratitude.

At the end of the day, gratitude is about the gift, yes but even more so it's about the Giver. And so to recap: gratitude is significant because it's the key to joy. And one of the chief signs of gratitude is coming to God, not because He's useful, but because he's beautiful.

The third point, the *source* of gratitude. If you're feeling convicted (like I am) and realizing you're not a grateful person, how can we change? If I don't have gratitude, how can I get it? The answer is here in the text.

Let's go back to the leper. What is it that triggers his return to Jesus? Clearly he realizes that he's been healed. However, theologians have pointed out that there's something more going on here. And it has to do with where the *leper* was going. Jesus tells him to go to the priests, to go to the temple to get a clean bill of health. But then mysteriously, he stops, puts everything else on hold and returns to Jesus.

What's going on here? The theologians point out that by putting his 'physical exam' on hold, it's very likely that the leper realizes that Jesus is more than simply a wandering miracle-worker. In some way, at some level, the leper realizes that Jesus is the true temple – where God and man can meet. Jesus is the true priest who mediates between God and man. And so the leper returns to give him worship.

And this is the ultimate key to gratitude. *To see Jesus everywhere and as the key to everything.* In Colossians Paul tells us that all things were created by Jesus and for Jesus. Everything in creation is a signpost to Him. Sometimes we see this in big ways – Jesus is the true temple, the great high priest, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But in another sense, *everything* points to Jesus.

Earlier I said that gratitude means we deserve nothing and thus can be grateful for everything. And when I say grateful for everything, I mean *grateful for everything*. We can be grateful even for our suffering. The Bible urges us to rejoice in our suffering. Why? Because we're masochists? No, because suffering is one of the ways we can see Jesus and be transformed into His image. Paul says, 'We rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces character, endurance, and hope.' James says, 'Count it all joy, my brother when you experience trials of many kinds.'

These verses are mysterious. What do they mean? Nigel Mumford has helped me to understand them. Many of you know Nigel. One of the global leaders in the healing prayer ministry...in 2009 he contracted the Swine Flu and spent 19 days in a coma. One doctor said he came as close to death without dying as anyone he'd ever seen. Miraculously, he survived, but his body was permanently ravaged. He now has trouble breathing, and even trouble walking.

But one of the insights Nigel has shared with me, when I've voiced my own sorrows and frustrations, is whatever challenge we face, we can turn it into a prayer of thanksgiving. We can thank Jesus for how it reminds us of him.

If I'm hungry. Thank you, Jesus, that this reminds me of when you were hungry for me, and that you are the bread of life.

If I'm sad, thank you, Jesus, that this reminds me of when you wept on this earth, and that you are my comforter.

If I've experienced romantic disappointment. Thank you, Jesus, that this reminds me of when you were spurned by those you love, and that now you are the bridegroom and lover of my soul.

If I am frustrated about injustice, thank you that this reminds me of your unjust death for me, and that on the last day you will return to make all things right.

If I am anxious about civil unrest, thank you, Jesus, that this reminds me of when you faced angry mobs, and that now you are my rock and refuge and the cornerstone that cannot be moved.

If I have sinned, thank you, Jesus, that this reminds me that you laid down your life to save sinners.

Yes, we can be grateful for anything, if we can look to God and trust that He's using it all for our ultimate good.

In CS Lewis' novel, *The Horse and His Boy*, there is a poignant moment where a horse named Hwin comes face-to-face with Aslan the lion, the Christ-figure in the story. Up to this point Hwin has been terrified of lions and been running away from them. But here she comes face-to-face with Aslan. And we read this:

'Then Hwin, though shaking all over, gave a strange little neigh and trotted across to the Lion. 'Please' she said, 'You're so beautiful. You may eat me if you like. I'd sooner be eaten by you than fed by anyone else.' 'Dearest daughter' said Aslan, planting a lion's kiss on her twitching, velvet nose, 'I knew you would not be long coming to me. Joy shall be yours.'

My friends, will you surrender your fears and entitlements, and embrace the King, simply because he is beautiful and good? Will you give him everything, and know His joy? Will you embrace the freedom and glory of gratitude? Let us pray.