

What Are You Thankful For?
November 19, 2006
Steven M Conger

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

Luke 17:11-19 The Message

It happened that as he made his way toward Jerusalem, he crossed over the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men, all lepers, met him. They kept their distance but raised their voices, calling out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Taking a good look at them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests."

They went, and while still on their way, became clean. One of them, when he realized that he was healed, turned around and came back, shouting his gratitude, glorifying God. He knelt at Jesus' feet, so grateful. He couldn't thank him enough—and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus said, "Were not ten healed? Where are the nine? Can none be found to come back and give glory to God except this outsider?" Then he said to him, "Get up. On your way. Your faith has healed and saved you."

You've gotta love that story from the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus is on a road trip, moving between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. As he enters a village, 10 people who are stricken with the disease leprosy (as the Bible understands it) approach him and before he can get too close to they begin to shout at Jesus: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Lepers were outcasts from society — they know that they are to keep their distance — they know that they are not allowed contact with "clean people" — but they are desperate for healing!

Jesus sees them and feels a desire to be merciful toward them. And he gives them a rather unusual command: “Go and show yourselves to the priests” (v. 14).

I don’t know about you — but that seems like a pretty weird response. But, some historical background — at the time of Jesus, a leper who was cured was required by religious law to go and show himself to a priest, because only a priest to certify that the person was truly clean. Once they were made ritually clean they could once again live in the community.

This is a mysterious, yet awesome story.

The story tells us that as the lepers are heading toward the priest, they realize that they have been miraculously cured. And one of them does something amazing. He turns around and runs back to Jesus — praising God all the way — falling on his face and thanking Jesus over and over again.

The question is: What happened to the other nine?

One gives thanks.

“Were not ten made clean?” asks Jesus. “But the other nine, where are they?” (v. 17).

Only one takes the time to count his blessings. Only one bothers to come back to Jesus and say thanks.

If I have my math right that is only a 10 percent return. That seems pretty pathetic.

But are we doing any better today?

Now, keep in mind that the other nine lepers did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They were obedient. They followed Jesus instructions. We shouldn’t fault them for that.

But gratitude and thanksgiving move us beyond the standard, — beyond the acceptable, or the ordinary.

A gracious attitude and lifestyle make one extraordinary, unusual, blessed, a cut above the rest.

Research reported in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggest that people who count their blessings find themselves sleeping better, exercising more and caring more about others.

People who remind themselves of the things they are grateful for — people who count their blessings one by one, consciously, every day — show significant improvements in

mental health, and even in some aspects of physical health. And these results appear to be true whether you are a healthy college student or an older person with an incurable disease.

You may be stuck with an incurable disease or a leper on your last leg, but you are going to benefit from counting your blessings.

The study was fascinating — Here's how the study was performed: College students were asked to fill out a weekly report of five things for which they were grateful. They listed such things as "the generosity of friends" and "the Rolling Stones." Another group, made up of adults with incurable diseases such as polio, were asked to write down a list of things that made them thankful.

Comparable groups were asked to count their hassles, instead of their blessings. They listed aggravations such as "hard to find parking" and "finances depleting quickly." Instead of focusing on how rich they were, members of these groups focused on their poverty.

The results were predictable. In the end, the grateful groups felt better about their lives and more optimistic about their prospects. The thankful college students exercised more, and the chronically ill adults who focused on blessings reported sleeping longer and waking up refreshed. The members of the grateful groups were also nicer to neighbors and more willing to help people with personal problems, leading the researchers to conclude that gratitude can serve as a "moral motivator."

Being thankful is good for your physical, mental and moral health.

The funny thing is, it doesn't seem to matter what you are grateful for, as long as you count your blessings. You can be appreciative of green grass, or generous friends, or loving family members, or pleasant elevator conversations. You can even thank God for the Rolling Stones.

In our story this morning — the biggest surprise is that the leper who turned back to Jesus to say thanks is — we are told — a Samaritan.

Now maybe this doesn't mean much to you — maybe you did not even notice this significant detail in the story. But to the hearers of the story in Jesus' day this would be not just a shock — but maybe even a heresy.

Samaritans were despised by the people of Jesus' day. They were: low-life losers, second-class citizens, members of the wrong race, region and religion. The Samaritan is not a respectable member of the community at all.

But, this Samaritan is the only one to count his blessings. And that, according to Jesus, makes all the difference. While the others had experienced the healing of their bodies,

this Samaritan had found healing in his soul as well.

“Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” asks Jesus. Then he says to the Samaritan, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (vv. 18-19).

Jesus expresses his disappointment with the nine perfectly respectable lepers who went on their way without so much as a thank-you, the nine ungrateful lepers who felt that they somehow deserved to be healed, the nine self-centered lepers who had so much to do that they couldn't take a nanosecond to return to Jesus and express their gratitude.

“Your faith has made you well,” says Jesus to the grateful leper.

In my mind's eye, I see Jesus giving him a high five — maybe even a hug, and sending him on his way.

So, what have you forgotten to say “thank-you” for today?

In this time of Thanksgiving, our challenge is to count our blessings — large and small, significant and stupid — and to be grateful to the One who is the source of every good and gracious gift. We don't deserve a thing, whether it's green grass or mischievous kids or caring co-workers or healthy hearts, so our attitude toward each day should be absolutely thick with thanksgiving.

A recent Barna Research poll revealed that despite international tensions and domestic economic problems, nine out of 10 Americans are happy with their lives and say that their religious faith has a lot to do with it. Nine out of 10 Americans are happy, and they credit their faith. That's an impressive statistic, but does it mean that nine out of 10 regularly turn to God and give thanks? Probably not. We may feel good about our lives, but we don't always give credit where credit is due.

If we can remember to be grateful, we'll find ourselves even healthier in body, mind and spirit. We'll feel better about our lives, more optimistic about our prospects and more helpful toward people around us. After all, Jesus proclaimed it, and modern research confirms it — a grateful life can make us well.

Thank God for the riches that roll our way.

On his way to church, a scholar was surprised to see a man in tattered clothes and barefoot. Nevertheless, as a good Christian, he greeted the poor man: "May God give you a good morning!"

The poor man replied cheerfully, "I have never yet had a bad morning."

"Then may God give you good luck!"

"I have never yet had bad luck."

"Well, may God give you happiness!"

"I have never yet been unhappy."

The scholar then asked the man, "Could you please explain yourself to me? I do not understand."

And the poor man replied, "With pleasure! You wish me a good morning, yet I have never had a bad morning. For when I am hungry, I praise God; when I feel cold, or when it is raining or snowing, I praise God; and that is why I have never had a bad morning."

"You wish that God may give me luck. However, I have never had bad luck. This is because I live with God and always feel what he does for me is the best. Whatever God sends me, be it pleasant or unpleasant, I accept with a grateful heart. That is why I have never had bad luck."

"Finally, you wish that God should make me happy. But I have never been unhappy. For all I desire is to follow God's will; I have surrendered my will so totally to God's will that, whatever God wants, that is what I also want. That is why I have never been unhappy."

—Attributed to Meister Eckhart.

We are God's people, touched by the Spirit to—
 Witness more effectively,
 Think more clearly,
 Feel more deeply,
 Listen more insightfully,
 Speak more truthfully,
 Love more extravagantly,
 Care more soulfully,
 Serve more creatively,
 Give more lavishly,
 Encourage more lovingly,
 Live more fully,
 Teach more eloquently,
 Give more generously.

—Wesley Taylor