

Gratitude, A Sign of Grace Received 2022
Psalm 103:1-14 Luke 17:11-19

Psalm 103:1-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. ² Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—³ who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, ⁴ who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, ⁵ who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. ⁶ The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. ¹⁴ For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

Luke 17:11-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹¹ 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."

In your opinion, what do you think the Lord is really like?

What image or picture comes to mind when you envision God?

As it turns out, our understanding of God's nature & our sense of God,
are most often influenced by finite and familiar metaphors
that are derived from our life-lessons and experiences.

A good friend grew up in a very tense and perfectionistic home.
Her parents were never satisfied, always demanding more,
and no matter what, never expressed that she'd done well.

Even with the assurance of grace she still lived in fear & insecurity,
and she was pretty sure that God was disappointed & upset with her.

**Religion for her, was rigid and stressed obligation and duty,
and trying to placate a distant, dissatisfied & demanding God.**

Another close friend told me that when she was growing up,
her father was an alcoholic, an angry, violent and abusive man,
but she envisions God as everything her earthly father wasn't –
- a gentle, dependable, nurturing and caring God

who will always protect her and keep her safe ...
... and she would absolutely glow whenever she talked about her God.

So when God looks at you, what do you suppose God thinks about you? --
-mostly a sinful disappointing failure or a precious beloved child?
Is your God more like a stern judge or a patient loving parent?

Generally, the way we envision God will dramatically shape
our religious outlook, our faith and our spiritual journey.

In this section of the Gospel of Luke that we read today
Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, traveling toward the cross.

Our text begins, vs. 11, "on the way to Jerusalem."

That phrase serves to connect the story of this event
to God's whole purpose and plan in sending Jesus Christ,
meaning that it's far more than
just a simple etiquette, "**you didn't even thank me**" story,
but **it's about the nature of our response to God's grace.**

The action begins with 10 lepers crying out for mercy,
and in keeping with the OT Laws in Leviticus about leprosy,
the diseased lepers kept their distance away from Jesus.

In those days,
leprosy was a most feared and dreaded incurable disease,
and stigmatized as a curse and harsh judgment from God.

It meant living a terrible and hopeless existence of separation,
cut-off from family and friends, and never being welcome anywhere.
Incurable, they were the walking dead under a death sentence.

In asking for mercy, the lepers were probably just begging for alms,
or perhaps they had heard about Jesus healing other lepers, vs. 13-14.

Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.

His words must have been confusing to the still-diseased lepers
yet nevertheless all the lepers obeyed his instructions,
and as they traveled in obedience, **they were made clean.**
I wonder what more God might do if we stepped-out in obedience more.

Try to imagine their shocked joy, and wonder, and excited delight
when as they were along the way, **God's healing overtakes them.**
Suddenly it dawns on them that they're no longer lepers,
and realize that **their incurable disease has been cured.**

**Such a wonderful example of God's grace and power,
receiving way more than they expected or imagined.**

The next scene is the core and main point of the story and message.
They have all had that terrible disease miraculously cured.

For 9 of them, their primary concern is to obey OT religious ritual,
in keeping with their perception of God as a sticker of the Law.
Notice, even after the cure, they never came any closer to Jesus.
Yes they followed the Law, **but they didn't respond to God's grace.**

But one of the lepers does something different, vs. 15-16

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.
He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

This brings us to the heart and practical question of this passage.

Based upon your understanding of the nature and desire of the Lord,
am you more likely to be,
one of the nine who go on to the priest at the Temple,
or would you be the one
who rushes back to Jesus, praising and thanking God?

Would God as you envision our heavenly Father be more pleased
by strict adherence to religious ritual, tradition & practice,
or by thanksgiving and gratitude, by worship and praise?

This story can help focus our attention on the gap between a faith
based on satisfying a harsh and demanding God through good works,
or a faith more inward as a relational response to God's grace?

In truth, it's supposed to be a little bit of both,
responding to grace permeates the heart and transforms the life.

Now all 10 lepers were *cleansed*, which is the Greek word for healed,
but only one of them returns, praising and thanking the Lord,
and recognizing that through Christ, God has healed him,
he turns back toward Jesus, to praise and worship God.

This is the only time in the Gospels that anyone ever thanked Jesus.
But before we immediately judge and condemn the 9 who kept walking,
how often have I been blessed, yet neglected to notice & give thanks?

That phrase, "turned back" is a very important theological term.

In the Greek, it's the same word usually translated as "repent",
which literally means, "to change your direction." (μετανοια)

This Samaritan turns back from the way of priestly rituals,
to praise & thank God as he bows down at the feet of Jesus.

He recognized that God has cured him through Jesus Christ,
and so he is focused more on the Giver and not just on the gift.
Sometimes we can be so absorbed and so focused on a glittery gift,
that we ignore the Giver which can lead to materialism and greed.

All that makes this **a salvation story** that ends with Jesus saying,
vs. 19 **"Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."**
 The Greek word that is here translated as "made well"
 is more frequently translated as "saved" or "salvation."

 It means to be made whole, or to be restored as God intends
 and is way more than just being cured of the disease.
The translation I prefer is **"through faith you have been made whole"**,
 or as in the old KJV, **Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.**
Faith in what? Faith in the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Wholeness and wellness refers to something beyond physical cure.
 It is being within a real and living relationship with the Lord,
 and healthy within the purpose, desire and intention of God.
It describes a life fulfilled in accord with God's desire for us.
 All ten were made 'clean', **but only one was made 'well'**,
 and **made well** or whole describes a healing of the heart.

 Something significant happened to that one beyond the other nine.
It was in recognizing that God had healed him through Jesus,
 that he also received something more than just physical cure.
 Gratitude to God is an active choice that we make
 that can reshape our perspective and how we live.

 Jesus was absolutely NOT saying,
 because you had enough faith, that's why you were healed.
But rather, that by your faith – by your giving thanks to God,
 now you are being made whole as God desires and intends for you,
 a relationship with God as characterized by joyful gratitude.

The Samaritan's gratitude is a true and clear sign of faith,
 a relationship with God characterized by joy and thanksgiving,
 that comes from recognizing what God has done and is doing.

Do you also hear and do you recognize the familiar themes
 that run throughout the life and ministry of Jesus Christ? --
 - beyond just religious rituals, tradition and rules,
 the focus is on grace, on our relationship with God,
 and God's gracious love for the outcast and sinner?

 That point is highlighted in vs. 17
Then Jesus asked, **"Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"**
 Where are the others? – following the OT religious purity rituals!

 Yes they all received mercy, their leprosy had been cured,
 but they didn't all respond to God's grace & invitation.

Failing to notice and express a sense of gratitude toward God
 is a reliable sign and symptom of a life-view and perspective

that is not aware, or does not choose to recognize,
God's work and activity in blessing our world & lives.

This story is actually a grace and salvation story
that parallels the gracious mission of Jesus Christ.

Theologically, this story serves as **a foretaste**
of what Jesus was going to accomplish in Jerusalem for us,
and **a foretaste** of the promised Kingdom of God's grace...

... that we belong and are uniquely created and gifted children of God
who are precious and loved enough for Jesus to sacrifice for us,
so that we can live into a relationship of grace through the H Spirit.

So, how does this story speak to us & specifically apply to us today?

This Lk 17 passage highlights two distinct understandings of God —
- one of human obligation and righteous performance
necessary to satisfy God's requirements and demands,

- or a God whose grace, cleansing and healing comes first
to whom we respond with gratitude, worship & discipleship,
and by living worthily of what we've first been given,
as we learn that we can give thanks in any situation.

During the Thirty-Years War, a terrible plague swept through Europe.

Martin Rinkart was a pastor in the besieged-city of Eilenburg,
and he was the last pastor left alive to serve his community.

He personally conducted over 4500 funerals during those years,
sometimes as many as 40-50 a day, including his own wife and family.

From that context of so much tragic loss, suffering and dying,
he wrote these remarkable and faithful words of our closing hymn:

Now thank we all our God, with heart, hands and voices; Who wondrous things has done, in
whom this world rejoices. Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

This Luke 17 story teaches us about noticing and recognizing
the gracious works of God continuously going on all around us
and that if we do, then gratitude will naturally follow & flow...

... **which suggests that the level of my sense of gratitude may be
a reasonable indicator of my spiritual health and walk of faith.**

As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out,
if the stars only appeared just one night in a thousand years,
we would stay up all night to see and appreciate them,
and tell our children about them for generations.

But since we see the stars most nights,
we barely look up, or even notice, appreciate or recognize
the beauty and wonder of God's amazing work all around us.

And those times when I am not feeling particularly grateful,
it's certainly not that God's blessing have ceased to flow.
But maybe I have gotten so focused on myself and what I want,
that I've ignored God's love for me and the blessings in my life.

I find that gratitude is a very good indicator of my walk of faith,
because giving thanks shifts my focus off of myself and my issues,
and onto the faithfulness & power, the wisdom & goodness of God,
which helps counteract my tendency toward self-centeredness.

Gratitude make us much more aware of the rich fullness of God's love,
as we increasingly notice God's steadfast presence,
and God's hand at work in our world and in our lives.

I've also learned that when I've had tough times and struggled most,
help and tenacity, courage and strength have come through prayer,
in particular & specifically, when I start writing out list
of all God's gifts and blessings that **I have received...**

... and then before long I began to feel better, renewed & closer,
more hopeful & ready, with strength and hope to continue on...

... and that is the wonderful power of gratitude to help sustain us
as we're attentive and appreciate the abundant blessings of God.

So as a regular spiritual exercise and practice,
when stress, anxiety or fear (or normal) threaten to overwhelm,
start writing your list of blessings & let gratitude restore you.

As we heard Janet read earlier, (Psalm 103:1-2)

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, -- who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.