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Sermon Notes

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Returning Thanks

Luke 17:11-19

It is certainly a joy and a delight to me to be back in this pulpit proclaiming to you the Word of God. And especially at the time of Thanksgiving. I personally feel overwhelmed with thankfulness at the many blessings of my life and my ministry, and one of the greatest is the privilege of being your pastor and of regularly proclaiming the Word of God to you.

God willing, I intend to resume my series in 1 Corinthians next week, in the middle of chapter 15 on the resurrection from the dead. But as I return to my preaching ministry today on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, I wanted to begin with a sermon entitled "Returning thanks" ... or perhaps, "Returning to Give Thanks." This is a national holiday entitled "Thanksgiving" we are celebrating. But in our increasingly secular American society, in which all mention of God is increasingly banished from popular consciousness, the word itself has become increasingly confused. In order to give thanks, you have to have someone to thank... and our nation more and more acts like we have no one to thank but ourselves.

We Christians know the truth! We know that this one statement makes it plain:

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

And again this:

***Romans 11:36 For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.***

So, it is right and proper for Christians to lead the way in giving thanks to God, the source of every blessing we have ever enjoyed on earth or in heaven. I want to begin by looking at an account from the life of Jesus in which thankfulness and thanklessness are on timeless display... Luke 17:11-19

I. Thankfulness and Thanklessness on Timeless Display

Luke 17:11-19 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him-- and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

A. The Context

1. The location... a border village between Galilee and Samaria
2. The Jews hated the Samaritans and had no dealings with them... they considered them half-breeds, worse than Gentiles because they had mingled and perverted the true religion of Moses with pagan religions after the exiles to Assyria and Babylon
3. But however much the average Jew hated Samaritans, they hated and feared lepers immeasurably more...
4. Leprosy was (it seems) the most dreaded contagion of Jesus' day... everyone was terrified of leprosy... it degenerated the human body, turning it into a living corpse; lepers were shunned from all society and gathered into terrible places like caves and other hovels far from all human interaction, away from family and friends...

they had to stand at a distance and cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” as a warning to all who might come near them and catch their terrible disease

5. So, these ten lepers were in that lamentable condition, living their terrible lives together in some kind of community, but desperate to escape their plight and return to normal society, to a normal life... they STOOD AT A DISTANCE
6. They had heard of Jesus’ power over all diseases... there was not a single disease that he couldn’t cure
7. They had perhaps even heard of him healing a leper at the beginning of his ministry, because the man had spread the news everywhere

Mark 1:40-45 A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. ⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴ "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere

8. So, these ten men came to Jesus with hope that he would cleanse them; they call out for him to have PITY on them...
9. They were calling to Jesus’ astonishing compassion for outcasts, the way his heart was melted and moved with compassion, the way he was the exception to the law that one should never touch a leper... Jesus could touch any leper and not become unclean himself... as there are two adjoining rooms, one of them brilliantly lit, the other one in deep darkness... if a door between them opens wide, the LIGHT floods in and drives the darkness completely away, not the other way around

John 8:12 Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

B. The Miracle Worked

1. Jesus did miracles in many different ways
2. With some, he had to be there and touch the people with his own hand
3. In other cases, he wasn't even in the same vicinity... as the Royal official's son in John 4... it was many miles away, and the man began the journey home and found out the next day when he arrived that his son was cured; the Syro-Phoenician's daughter, Jesus never saw her, never touched her, never even spoke a word... but the demon left instantly
4. In this case, Jesus gives the ten lepers something to do... "Go show yourselves to the priests" to confirm your cleansing... they were to begin the walk there **BEFORE THE CLEANSING HAD EVEN HAPPENED**... like Joshua and Israel crossing the Jordan River opposite Jericho... they had to step into the river, and then the miracle happened
5. So, these ten lepers began the journey of faith, and while they were on the way, the healing happened to all ten of them... they were cleansed of their disease

C. Thankfulness on Display

1. While all ten of them were on the way and all ten of them were instantly cleansed, one of them noticed that he was healed
2. Perhaps he looked at his hand... perhaps it had been covered with bleeding sores; perhaps through decay he had lost some fingers... but he looked down and saw his hand was completely restored

Like it was said of what happened to Naaman the leper, whom Elisha cleansed:

2 Kings 5:14 his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

3. So it was with this one leper... his flesh was restored and looked like he was a young man again

4. Immediately he realized what had happened, and one overwhelming feeling filled his mind... THANKFULNESS: "I must return to Jesus and thank him!!"
5. So, he went back and thanked God at Jesus' feet

Luke 17:15-16 One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him-- and he was a Samaritan

6. This is a beautiful picture of a truly thankful person... his heart is consumed with gratitude, his body is immersed in the moment of worship... and he is giving glory to GOD through the person of his SON... Jesus Christ
7. He is down at Jesus' feet... he is essentially worshiping Jesus as God, but it is all flowing from the healing he has just received
8. This demeanor, this moment is the whole purpose of my sermon... that each one of you would see fit to do the same for your salvation... to throw yourself down before the feet of Christ and overflow with thanksgiving

D. Jesus Uncovers the Ingratitude

Luke 17:17-18 Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

1. Jesus is underscoring the fact that nine out of ten healed people never bothered to come back and say THANK YOU... to give praise to God for the blessing they had just received
2. Now we might think Jesus was being a little strict, or in our case we might say "Jumping to conclusions"... if it were us, we would have to say "I don't actually know if they gave thanks to GOD or not..." They certainly didn't come back and say thank you to Jesus
3. But Jesus is perfect in his knowledge of the hearts of men...

John 2:24-25 Jesus knew all men. ²⁵ He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man

4. The fact of the matter is, because Jesus zeroes in on the fact that NINE never returned to give thanks to God, they actually didn't thank God at all... they just went on their way happy and healed, and never had a thought of God at all
5. Thus we must come to the negative part of the sermon... the deep problem of INGRATITUDE toward God

II. The Plague of Thanklessness

A. Everyone of Us Displays Consistent Patterns of Thanklessness to God

1. Actually, I asked a dear friend (a godly man) if he thought this ratio of lepers represented the percentage of blessings he received from God that he actually thought about and returned and thanked God for... 1 out of 10... TEN PERCENT. He said, "No, that would probably be on my best day!!"
2. So, perhaps we return thanks for 1% (one out of 100) blessings that God lavishes on us...
3. Time after time we cry out to God when we are hurting, begging for healing or forgiveness of sins or some material blessing; and when he doesn't answer our prayers, we get angry... but if he DOES answer our prayers, we forget to thank him

B. The Thanklessness of Lost People

Romans 1:21 although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

1. Lost people spend their days immersed in a godless world
2. The marvels of creation that surround them, they do not see the hand of a Creator that crafted them
3. The delicious fruits they savor, with the sweet juices of the fresh peach or the tart crisp apple stimulating their taste buds... they do not thank God for
4. The spectacular displays of fall foliage that fill our eyes with dazzling colors—the fiery reds and golden yellows—and the fierce

blue skies of a magnificent fall afternoon... their mind does not extend up to God who made them

5. Their own bodies which scripture says were knit together in their mother's wombs by the special knowledge and skill of God, their dexterous fingers and strong legs and clever minds—all of them crafted by the hand of God
6. At night, especially in the late fall when the air is crisp and they are away from the city's light pollution, they can see the Milky Way—thousands of twinkling stars proclaiming—even shouting—the existence of a powerful, wise, loving Creator

Psalm 19:1-2 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

7. Unbelievers do not make room for the existence of God as they drink in creation

Psalm 10:4 In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.

8. So, they do not thank God at all

Years ago, Christi and I hosted a man and his wife for dinner; this man was a PhD student at Duke University and a Triathlete... a very accomplished, talented man... his wife had recently come to faith in Christ, much to this man's annoyance. He was an agnostic. But he was willing to come eat dinner with us and talk to me, because his wife really wanted him to. I think he was excited about the challenge of debating me about theology and the existence of God and about the evidence for evolution and all that.

He successfully parried and blocked and overcame all different attempts I made to point him to God. I used the statement "there are no atheists in foxholes" ... that when people are in imminent danger of dying, they often cry out to God. But he proudly told me of a time in which his life was in great danger, and he never once had a thought of God.

At the end of the evening, he was very polished in thanking Christi for the wonderful meal and me for the stimulating conversation. I noted that he had thanked us and that he was very well-mannered. He looked proud again and said his mother had raised him right. I then said, "But actually, you have lived your whole life in God's living room, eating God's food and breathing God's air and drinking God's water. Shouldn't you have the good manners to thank him?" For the first time all night, he was silent... he had no answer.

Romans 1:21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

C. Yet, Even Once We Are Converted... We Still Struggle with Thanklessness... Ingratitude Toward God

1. Two states of mind opposite to thanksgiving: ENTITLEMENT and ENVY
2. Thanksgiving is tied to BLESSINGS... these sinful states of mind have to do with blessings we DO HAVE and blessings we DON'T HAVE

D. Entitlement: "I deserve the blessings I have"

1. This kills thanksgiving... why should we be thankful for just simply a matter of justice? What we truly deserve
2. The most common reason for entitlement: "I EARNED these blessings!"
 - a. I worked hard for my money... I deserve everything I have ever gotten
 - b. I worked hard for my college degree... I deserve it
 - c. I worked hard for my tennis championship... I deserve it
 - d. It's amazing how God actually addresses this very attitude

Deuteronomy 8:17-18 You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth

- e. God had warned the Israelites when they went into the Promised Land and ate crops they did not plant, and drank wine from vineyard they did not tend, and when they lived in wonderful houses they did not build, they would become ARROGANT and forget God in their wealth and affluence
 - f. We American Christians need to beware that such an attitude of entitlement does not creep into our hearts... and we feel we actually DESERVE the countless blessings we have in this country... blessings of peace, and order, and prosperity, and abundant natural resources, and freedom of religion and freedom of speech and freedom of the press and democratic processes by which we elect our own leaders
3. Another aspect of entitlement is EXPECTATION... NORMALCY... kids who grow up in affluence just become ACCUSTOMED to the river of blessings that come their way with little or no effort on their part, and they are USED TO these blessings and EXPECT them and TAKE THEM FOR GRANTED
 4. All of these aspects of entitlement sap thankfulness from our hearts... we are used to convenient low-cost food, good roads, fair government, abundant opportunity to earn money, freedom from fear of anarchy... we are just USED to these blessings and expect them and are not thankful for them as we should be

E. Envy

1. The flip side of thanklessness is envy... blessings you DON'T HAVE but thing you should... again, you may feel you deserve them
2. So you see the prosperity of another person, and their successes, and their honors and promotions and family life and whatever... and your heart may secretly burn with envy

3. And as a result, your own job and possessions and family and honors and privileges seem to be very small and not worthy of thankfulness

Like the Fisherman and his wife... the Hans Christian Andersen fable of a fisherman who catches a miraculous fish, and the fish ends up granting a series of wishes to this man because of the incessant envy and covetousness of his discontent wife... she wanted a cottage and gets it; but that's not enough; next she wants a wooden house with a large garden and gets it; but that's not enough... next she wants a castle and huge orchard and rolling hills filled with deer, and she gets it; eventually the magic fish has had enough of her discontent and she ends up back in the dirt hovel where they started

At every step of the way, the woman's envy makes her bitterly discontent about her present circumstances

- F. STOP: Does Entitlement or Envy rob you of thankfulness toward God??

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting

III. The Power of Present Thankfulness

- A. Begins with Salvation

Psalm 103:1-3 Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. ² Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- ³ who forgives all your sins

1. Let's start with this! We should daily go back to the feet of Christ as the leper did and throw ourselves down before him and thank him for his ATONEMENT
2. We had something far worse than leprosy... we were covered with GUILT, and that guilt made us in danger of being excluded not just from earthly friends and family, but from heaven itself... to hear

the dreadful words “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

3. Jesus took all of our sins on himself and died under the curse of God
4. So ALL OUR SINS (not just some of them) have been fully paid for by the blood of Christ
5. This is the single greatest blessing we have ever received... greater than any physical healing could ever be
 - a. When the paralyzed man was let down through the roof by his four friends, he and they all thought his greatest need was physical healing... to be able to walk again
 - b. But when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven!” This was the single greatest need the man had and therefore the greatest gift he could ever receive.
 - c. Even more in that Jesus was effectively saying “Take heart, son, the hell you deserve for your vast innumerable sins against a holy God... I will pay that price myself! I will drink the cup of God’s wrath on your behalf, and you will never be condemned. So take heart, son... your sins are all PAID FOR IN MY BLOOD!”
6. All Christians should begin their Thanksgiving celebration with this central blessing... for Paul makes it plain in Romans that everything else in the universe was less to the Father than the gift of his only Begotten Son for your sins

Romans 8:32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

B. Extends to All Other Spiritual Blessings

1. We should extend our thanksgiving beyond this central one of full forgiveness of sins
2. Every lesser blessing flows to us through the blood of Christ

3. We should thank God for the faith we needed to tap into Christ's death... faith and obedience to the gospel are gifts of God's grace

Ephesians 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Romans 6:17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.

4. So also the perseverance we've had since we first believed
 - a. You're still a Christian all these many years later because God has sustained your faith and Christ has prayed for you at the right hand of God
5. We should regularly THANK GOD for our salvation in all of its dimensions

C. Extends to All Temporal Blessings

Psalm 103:1-5 Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. ² Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- ³ who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, ⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

1. Physical healing
2. Love and compassion... family, friends, church members
3. "Satisfies your desires with GOOD THINGS"... food, clothing, shelter, jobs, money, luxuries, entertainments, experiences... on and on
4. THANK GOD FOR ALL OF THESE THINGS!

D. Tied Directly to Christian Contentment

1. Thankfulness is a sweet demeanor very closely tied to Christian contentment

2. Unlike the entitlement and envy we discussed earlier, the secret of Christian contentment is linked with a sense of thankfulness to our wise, heavenly Father who gives us everything we need day after day

Philippians 4:12-13 I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Jeremiah Burrough: "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit that freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."

E. Is Extremely Attractive and Fruitful

1. A deeply consistently thankful Christian is a happy person
2. Happiness comes from not having what you want but wanting what you have... better... Christian happiness comes from realizing everything you have and everything you DON'T HAVE has been wisely apportioned by a loving heavenly Father
3. Such people are extremely attractive to others who are constantly grumbling and complaining and filled with entitlement and envy
4. What would saturating your marriage with thankfulness do for you both?
 - a. Instead of seeing how your spouse could be better, do better, make you happier... you deeply thank God for him/her and then express consistently and specifically ways you are thankful for him/her
5. What about your parenting?
 - a. Are you raising kids that are ENTITLED or ENVIOUS... or are you raising kids that are truly THANKFUL to God for their blessings

IV. The Eternal Future of Thankfulness

- A. A large part of our worship in heaven will be learning the immeasurable ways God blessed his people, and returning thanks for each one
- B. Most of the blessings God lavished on us in this life, we were too busy to return thanks for... too consumed with the moment, and with selfish motives and temporary concerns to see how God was blessing us
- C. But in heaven, we will get an eternal DO-OVER... a chance to circle back and thank God for his many blessings

Revelation 4:9-11 *Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ¹¹ "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*

Revelation 7:11-12 *All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"*