

## **Thanksgiving: Responding to the Goodness of God**

Luke 17:11-19

You may have heard the story of the farmer who was reminded that farming is really a partnership between the farmer and God. The farmer's response was, "That may be so, but you should have seen this farm when God had it all by Himself!" The farmer had a point, but his response illustrates that in every circumstance we have the opportunity either to minimize or to magnify what God has done. Day by day as we live our lives, we will either ignore what God has done or we will notice what God has done and respond with thanksgiving.

Today we are going to look at a very simple account in the gospel of Luke that illustrates these two basic responses to the goodness of God. As we go through this passage, ask God to reveal to you which response normally characterizes you. "God, is it the habit of our hearts to notice your goodness all around us and respond with thanksgiving? Or do we take your goodness for granted?" Please turn with me to Luke 17:11-19.

### **Responding to the Goodness of God (Luke 17:11-19)**

Verse 11 gives an important geographical detail, setting the context for this passage.

11 While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee.

Back in chapter 9 we read that when He was in Galilee (in the north) that Jesus "resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). Luke makes it clear that Jesus knew exactly what awaited Him in Jerusalem: crucifixion. The shortest route between Galilee and Jerusalem was through Samaria. As you're probably aware, there was great animosity between Samaritans and Jews. The Jews viewed the Samaritans as racially and spiritually inferior. The Samaritans resented the Jews and their insistence that true worship happens only at the temple in Jerusalem. Here in chapter 17, we read that Jesus was "passing between Samaria and Galilee" (probably because the Samaritans did not receive Him; see 9:52-53).

12 As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him;

The Law specified that a leprous person had to dwell "outside the camp" because he was ceremonially unclean.

13 and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Apparently these leprous men had heard about Jesus' power to heal, and so they cried out to Him for mercy.

14 When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed.

Jesus was rather unpredictable in **how** He healed people. In an earlier incident (5:12ff), Jesus had healed a leper by touching him. But here Jesus heals them "as they were going" to show themselves to the priests. The Law stipulated that when a person thought he was healed from a disease such as leprosy, he had to go to the priest to be pronounced clean. These men evidently believed that they would be clean by the time they got to the priests - and they were.

At this point in the narrative, Luke explicitly points out that the only one to show gratitude to Jesus was a Samaritan.

15 Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, 16 and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan.

Luke probably means for us to assume that most of the other lepers were Jews. How ironic that the only one to turn back was a Samaritan! The thankfulness of this Samaritan is as ironic as the generosity of the "good Samaritan" Jesus talked about in Luke 10 and the faith of the Samaritan "woman at the well" in John 4. Jesus made clear in His earthly ministry that race, gender, and nationality didn't matter; what mattered was the heart.

Jesus made sure that those who were with Him didn't miss the irony of the situation:

17 Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine-- where are they? 18 "Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" 19 And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well."

The Jews should have been the first to respond with thanksgiving. After all, they had the Law and the prophets; they worshiped in the right place. But only the Samaritan turned back to glorify God. In response to the Samaritan man's thanks, Jesus pronounced, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well" - literally, "your faith has saved you." The fact that the Samaritan man "gave thanks" and "gave glory to God" was evidence of his faith. It doesn't *necessarily* require faith to cry out to God for mercy; it is a rather **natural** impulse to cry out to God in distress. But it is a response of **faith** to give thanks afterwards. Because he returned to give thanks, Jesus commended this man for his faith. He was not only "healed"; he was saved. The others got mercy; the Samaritan got salvation.

**Our Responses to God's Goodness:** This passage illustrates two different responses to God's goodness. As we consider each of these responses, allow God to show you how you naturally respond to your circumstances - which is another way of saying "how you naturally respond to God" because He is sovereign over your circumstances.

**Response #1: Ungratefulness (indifference toward the glory of God).** When we read this account in Luke, we can hardly believe that only one out of ten returned. They were passionate about being healed, but they were indifferent about expressing gratitude and giving glory to God. They had cried out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And yet 9 out of 10 didn't even both to return to give glory to God.

We might give these nine the benefit of the doubt and say that they were only doing what Jesus told them to do (show themselves to the priest). But Jesus Himself suggests that their lack of gratitude was wrong: "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine-- where are they?" Their ungratefulness indicated that they were only concerned about what Jesus could do for them. They really weren't concerned about God getting the credit for what they'd experienced. We don't know what was going through their minds at the time, but their response suggests a real self-centeredness.

This self-centered, ungrateful approach to God is also rather pervasive in our day. Bruce Shelley, professor of church history at Denver Seminary, makes this observation:

In recent years Americans have chosen churches not so much to meet God and surrender to his revealed ways as to satisfy some personal need. Unlike the rich young ruler in the Gospels, church attenders seldom ask, 'What must I do?' They are far more likely to ask, 'What do I get out of this?' (*The Consumer Church*)

It is true that we first come to Christ because we have a need that only He can meet. Only He can take away our sin and give us life from above. We'd be foolish not to come to Jesus to meet that need. And the ten lepers would have been foolish not to cry out to Jesus for mercy. But we need to understand early on that **God doesn't exist for our glory. We exist for God's glory.** Nine out of ten of the lepers who were healed didn't understand this. Only one returned to "give glory to God."

I wonder if the ratio is much different today. When I was growing up, one of the worst things you could be called was "spoiled brat." There are many kinds of brats, but a *spoiled* brat was the worst: somebody who had "everything" and didn't appreciate it. Sometimes when I'm grumbling about some insignificant inconvenience or when something doesn't go my way, the thought runs through my mind, "You're just being a spoiled brat. Look at everything God has given you. Look at the blessings of family and friends. Consider the fact that you have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."

I recently read the account of the children of Israel in the wilderness (in Exodus and Numbers). One of the most prominent sins in the lives of the children of Israel was "grumbling" - which goes hand-in-hand with ungratefulness. On the surface of it they should have been full of thankfulness because God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt; they'd seen miracles and signs and wonders, and they'd experienced the presence of God in very tangible ways. But they just couldn't stop grumbling; they grumbled about Moses' leadership, about water, about food, about dangers, etc. Like all grumblers, they were fixated on what was wrong and what they didn't have instead of

what was right and what they did have. Like all grumblers, they probably felt justified in grumbling.

What they didn't understand (and what we often don't understand) is that they were "grumbling against [God]" (Numbers 14:27). Instead of being thankful to God and full of faith, they grumbled against God. They were judged/disciplined harshly. Their lack of thankfulness should be a serious warning to us. If you tend to be a person who is fixated on what's wrong - in other people, in the church, in your circumstances - Thanksgiving week would be a great time to open your heart to another way of responding to your circumstances, which is really another way of responding to God!

**Response #2. Thankfulness (passionate about the glory of God).** When the Samaritan man saw that he was healed, he turned back, glorifying God in a loud voice (he didn't mind "making a scene"), fell on his face at Jesus' feet, **giving thanks to Him**. When he did this Jesus didn't say, "Please, don't mention it . . . I do this sort of thing every day . . ." No, it was only right for the man to "mention it."

In the same way it is fully appropriate for us to "mention" the good things that God has done for us. Like the Samaritan man, we need to slow down and take the time to express back to God, "Thank You for what you have done in my life." The Samaritan man wasn't content in only receiving from God; he wanted to give something back to God. For him, the loop wasn't completed until he gave thanks. In this way he demonstrated that he was passionate about the glory of God.

How would you evaluate your own habits of thanksgiving? Do you take the time to slow down and express back to God, "Thank You for what You have done and for what You are doing in my life"? Honestly, do you care whether or not God gets the glory for the things He has done?

We need to understand that such gratitude is the appropriate response of faith **regardless of our circumstances**. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18:

16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

"In everything give thanks" - not merely in good circumstances, but "in everything. And so **when we have plenty and when things are going well**, we should give thanks. We shouldn't allow our affluence and comfort to dull our spiritual senses so that we take God for granted and forget that everything we have is a gift of God. The next breath of air . . . the next bite of food . . . "every good and perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father of lights."

Thanksgiving is not only appropriate during favorable circumstances, but also **in the midst of trials and suffering**. Many Scriptures suggest that even during tough times, our hearts can and should be full of thanksgiving because God is always good. If you think, "Until my circumstances improve I can't really give thanks," you may never give

thanks in this life. Experience even suggests that sometimes we can be **more grateful** during hardship because we're now painfully aware of how good God has been all along. Neil Wiseman, a pastor and author, has written this:

Every pain has the potential for gratitude. Every problem provides an opportunity for stronger faith and new relationships. The need for surgery can make us dread the pain or thank God for the surgeon's skills. Rebellious children can cause us to curse the day the child was born or thank God for the good days of childhood and the possibility of better days ahead. Stormy weather can create dreary complaints or gratitude for sunny days. The death of a spouse can produce a terror of the future or a song of thanksgiving for ten thousand shared joys. A broken souvenir can bring anger against the person who accidentally broke the object or a thought of thanks for all the times it produced a joyous memory. A thankful heart discovers blessings in what others overlook.

Every circumstance – whether favorable or unfavorable – provides the opportunity to look through the eyes of faith and give thanks to God. Since God is always good - regardless of our circumstances - we can always give thanks . . . ***if we look through the eyes of faith.***

As you look at your circumstances through the eyes of faith, what are the things for which you can and should you give thanks? How can you give glory to God this morning?