

## ***The Case for Giving Thanks in the Tough Times***

*Two Convictions*

*Luke 17:7-19*

As we approach the holiday of Thanksgiving, we are taking two Sundays to talk about giving thanks. Specifically, we want to make the case for ***giving thanks in the tough times***.

I suspect that almost all of us agree in principle that giving thanks is always good. But are we the type of people who can give thanks in the tough times - when our circumstances aren't what we'd like? That's the case this year for many of us. We could make a long list of disappointments and discouragements; we could make a long list of ways that we wish 2020 was different. It's relatively easy to give thanks in good times, but God tells us to give thanks in ***every*** circumstance.

For example, Psalm 106 tells us:

1 Praise the Lord!  
Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever!

Since God is good all the time, giving thanks is good all the time, even in the midst of disappointments. In Philippians 4 Paul wrote:

6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

While we are casting our anxieties on God and asking Him to act on our behalf, our petitions are supposed to be peppered with thanksgiving. In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul wrote:

18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

How can we become the type of people who actually do the will of God by giving thanks even when times are tough? Today we're going to look at a passage of Scripture that begins to answer that question. Luke 17:7-19 tells us that if we are going to be people who give thanks in the tough times, we need to think rightly about ourselves (as disciples) and rightly about Jesus (as our Lord). Please stand as I read today's Scripture. **READ Luke 17:7-19 (ESV)**.

The first paragraph (verses 7-10) explains ***how we should think about ourselves as disciples*** if we want to be people who give thanks even in the tough times. Let's notice again the scenario Jesus poses.

7 "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'?"

In verse 7 Jesus has his disciples imagine that they “[had] a servant.” In other words, Jesus say to them, “Imagine that you are a farmer and you have a man working for you. You are paying this man wages and providing him the security of a household. Your servant has been working hard plowing or taking care of sheep; he’s been doing the work that he’s supposed to do. When he comes in from the field, you don’t say to him, ‘Come at once and recline at table because I have prepared a meal for you.’ No, in verse 8 Jesus says. . .

8 Will he 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’?

. . . you’ll say to your servant, ‘Prepare supper for me, clean yourself up, and serve me while I eat and drink. Afterwards you will eat and drink.’” If you were a farmer with a servant, it would have worked that way.

We need to resist the temptation to critique the scenario Jesus poses here; we’re missing the point if we think, “I’d never talk to a servant the way Jesus is describing.” In the first century (and in many places in the 21st century), this scenario would have made perfect sense. Jesus drives home the point in verse 9.

9 Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?

The implied answer is “No, you don’t thank someone for doing what they were required to do.” This is different from the way we tend to think about giving thanks. We consider it a common courtesy to say “thanks” anytime anyone does something for us, even if that’s their job. But Jesus is implying that you only give thanks when someone has done something that **wasn’t** required. This doesn’t imply that there is anything wrong with our common courtesy of saying “thanks” to everyone who serves us or shows kindness to us. But in the context of a master with a servant, you only say thanks when someone has done something that **wasn’t** required.

So what is the point of this scenario? Jesus tells us in verse 10.

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.’ ”

This is a vision for how we as Jesus’ disciples are supposed to think about ourselves. When we have done all that Jesus has commanded us to do, our conviction is basically, “We don’t think of ourselves as those who deserve to **be thanked**. Rather, we are unworthy servants who are only doing what Jesus commands.” This was the way Paul thought about himself. When he wrote letters to churches, he often identified himself as a “servant” (some translations read “bondservant”) of Christ. In Philippians 1:1, for example, Paul wrote:

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi . . .

Paul was declaring up front that he and Timothy were loyal servants of Jesus. Jesus gave them commands and assignments that they gladly obeyed, no matter how hard (which he did - Acts 22:10). They didn't view Jesus' commands as suggestions; they didn't view Jesus' commands as unreasonable. They trusted and obeyed their master. After all, they were pursuing the mission of making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to *obey all that Jesus commanded*.

We need to be very clear about this. This is how we should think about ourselves as disciples: "***We are unworthy servants who are simply doing what our Lord commands.***" This is a statement about the Lordship of Jesus in our lives. The reason we acknowledge his Lordship is because he died on the cross for our sins and then rose again on the third day!

I think you can see how this conviction about the Lordship of Jesus prepares us to give thanks in the tough times. By his death and resurrection, Jesus has already done more for us than we could ever repay. If Jesus never did another single thing for us, we would still be indebted to him. Our thankfulness and our obedience aren't dependent upon what he's done for us lately. He is our Lord, therefore he deserves our thanks no matter what.

Somebody who embodied this conviction was Job. Job was a very obedient, righteous man. When everything was taken away from him, he fell down and worshiped saying, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). And later, "Shall we accept good from God and not adversity?" (Job 2:10) For Job, worship and thanksgiving were equally appropriate when he had prosperity and when he had lost everything.

If we carry this conviction into the tough times of our lives, all sorts of possibilities for thanksgiving open up. For example, James 1 tells us that God uses our trials to refine us and produce endurance. When I think back to some of the tough times in my life, I would never want to rewind the clock and relive those days; at the same time, the things God taught me are priceless. You can give thanks to God that he will use the trials in your life to teach you things you wouldn't otherwise learn, things that will help you be a better servant/disciple of Jesus.

Before we continue, I want to make a somewhat subtle but important point. When we study a passage of Scripture, we need to be very careful to discern what question it is answering. This passage is answering the specific question, "How should we think about ourselves when we've been obedient?" The answer is that we should think of ourselves as "unworthy servants who are simply doing what our Lord commands." This passage does not answer all sorts of other questions such as, "How does our Lord treat us after we've been obedient to what he commands?" If you want the answer to that question you could look at Luke 12:35-40; there Jesus tells us that he is a master who treats us much, much better than we deserve. (See NOTE #1) He actually shows us the same type of lavish hospitality we studied in Psalm 23:5 a couple weeks ago.

The second paragraph (verses 11-19) explains **how we should think about God** if we want to be people who give thanks even in the tough times. (Luke 17:9-10)

Notice how the men with leprosy appealed to Jesus:

11 On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee.  
12 And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance  
13 and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

They had obviously heard about Jesus and his power to heal. So they address him as a superior, calling him "Master" (not the normal term translated "Lord," but a term unique to Luke). And they ask for mercy, which by definition is never deserved. Mercy has to be freely given. So these are ten men are asking a "master" for something they didn't deserve.

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

The Law stipulated that when a person thought they had been healed from a disease such as leprosy, they had to go to the priest to be pronounced clean. These men followed Jesus' instructions; evidently they believed that they would be healed by the time they got to the priests, and they were.

15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; 16 and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.

Samaritans were never the hero of the story (unless Jesus was the one telling the story). From a Jewish perspective they were outsiders and the most unlikely people to enter the kingdom of God. But in the gospel of Luke, the people who "got it" were most often the outsiders and the unlikely. Jesus made sure that those who were with Him didn't miss the irony of the situation:

17 Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? 18 Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

Jesus didn't say, "Don't mention it. . . I'm God in the flesh. . . this is just what I do. . ."  
No, he pointed out that ten out of ten were healed but only one out of ten returned to give thanks and praise God. Only the Samaritan understood that when you ask your Master to show you mercy and He does, it is fully appropriate to acknowledge as much. Jesus mentions the man's faith in verse 19. Giving thanks and glory to God is a litmus test of whether or not a person has saving faith. In Romans 1:21 when Paul described how people reject God even though they've seen overwhelming evidence of him in creation, his comment was that "they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. . ."

So how should we think about God if we want to be people who give thanks even in the tough times? **“God is a merciful Master who gives us what we don’t deserve.”** As Jesus established in his earlier scenario, thanks is appropriate only when someone has done something for you that **wasn’t** required. Since God is a merciful master who gives to us in ways he isn’t required to do, giving thanks is always appropriate - even when times are tough. [See NOTE #2]

If this is a difficult season for you, it’s all the more important that you fix your eyes on Jesus and notice how merciful he is to you. Why? Because Jesus has shown you the greatest possible mercy by taking on flesh and blood and “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” If he never did anything else, that would be enough to thank him throughout all eternity. But the fact of the matter is that he lavishes grace upon us day by day, especially in the tough times.

Remember Psalm 23:4 - “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” If you care to notice, you will be able to give thanks to your Good Shepherd for leading you, giving you rest and nourishment, for returning you when you’re a lost sheep, for protecting you from all sorts of threats, for showing you goodness and mercy all the days of your life.

My encouragement to you is to dwell on these two convictions this week. The manuscript of this sermon will be available on our web site tomorrow morning. Use the two convictions we’ve discussed to think rightly about yourself as a servant and about God as a merciful Master.

Lastly, I’ll mention that one of primary practices that helps these convictions take root in our hearts is corporate worship - gathering together to worship through prayer, song, Scripture, confessions. The songs we sing, for example, give voice to the very convictions we’ve talked about today. My heart goes out to those of you who haven’t been able to gather for corporate worship for eight months. I pray that you’re able to enter into worship wherever you are; as awkward as it might be, I hope you sing out loud the songs that are led here in the worship center. Many of the songs we sing remind us of things that often forget: 1) Since Jesus is Lord, we seek to be servants who love him, however imperfectly, with everything we’ve got. 2) God is a merciful Master who showers us with grace day by day, even in the tough times.

**NOTE #1:** As we saw earlier, Luke 17:7-10 answers the question, “How should we view ourselves when we are obedient to Jesus’?” But if we want an answer to the question, **“How will Jesus ultimately treat us** when he finds us obedient,” we could look back at Luke 12:35–38. Here’s what we find:

35 “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, 36 and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and

serve them. 38 If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!

Those who stay awake and obey Jesus with the attitude, "I don't deserve any thanks or any notice," will be thanked and noticed. Those who serve as if they don't deserve to be served by their Master, will be served by their Master!

**NOTE #2:** If you look over in Luke 18:9-14, you'll see Jesus' parable about a man who embodied the opposite of what we've been discussing. When the Pharisee went to the temple, here's his prayer of thanksgiving: "God, I thank you that I am not like everybody else - like that tax collector over there." He wrapped up his prayer by rehearsing how obedient he'd been (fasting and tithing). By contrast the tax collector stood at a distance and cried out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." He went down justified because he understood that God is a merciful Master who gives us what we don't deserve.