

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino  
Luke 17:11-19  
September 4, 2019

### Feeling Grateful

How awesome to hear Bob McKusick and Harrison Hartrim-Lowe's story about how they worked together to invest the money they received from our Ten Talents Challenge from last year. It was so much fun to watch them at work selling the plants that they divided and repotted for our Craft Fair last spring. Well done good and faithful stewards!

To refresh our memories, this challenge put into practice Jesus' Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30. One Sunday, Cascades gave out \$5,000 or \$40 to every adult and \$20 to every youth to invest however they felt called. We told people that after a particular length of time, we would ask for either that money to be returned to our Benevolence Fund to help serve under resourced families in Clark County or for their stories on how and where they felt called to give it. Equally fun, was to learn how people listen to the Holy Spirit to steward those funds.

When we read the parable, it's clear that the Master who gave out the money was less concerned with the returned investment than he was about the heart of each of the steward going into the challenge. We saw how the first two servants had attitudes of gratitude, while the third servant was held captive to an ingracious and negative spirit.

In other words, he was a half empty glass person rather than half full.

Having an attitude of gratitude is a pretty important quality for God's people. We have been so blessed by God, so you'd think that we would be some of the most gracious people. Right? And yet, "a study funded by the John Templeton Foundation found that most of us suffer from what is known as a gratitude gap. We know that we should be grateful, but something holds us back. In the survey, 94% of Americans thought people who are grateful are also more fulfilled and lead richer lives. But less than half the people surveyed said they express gratitude on a regular basis."<sup>1</sup>

One study after another has connected gratitude to higher levels of happiness and lower level of depression and stress. An article in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology evaluating all the literature in the field concluded that gratitude may have the highest connection to mental health and happiness of any of

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries - How a Year Looking On the Bright Side Can Transform Your Life* (New York: Dutton, 2015), 13.

the personality traits studied. The conclusion: “Around 18.5% of individual differences in people’s happiness could be predicted by the amount of gratitude they feel.”<sup>2</sup>

“Boston-area scientists found the most optimistic people live an average of 11 to 15 percent longer than their more pessimistic peers. Women who are optimists are also 50 percent more likely to live at least to age 85, while male optimists are 70 percent more like to live that long.” The research also showed that “optimistic people tend to have lower risk of chronic diseases and premature death.”<sup>3</sup>

Over the next couple of months, we are going to be learning more about the power of gratitude. The Roman philosopher Cicero famously said, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.”<sup>4</sup> It impacts so much our lives. Clearly this is very a very timely topic because The Columbian published two articles this past week on the impact of optimism on our lives. Do you think God is trying to say something to us or what?

Jesus healed people of all kinds of diseases. His reputation spread throughout the region like wildfire. Today we see that as Jesus was traveling between Samaria and Galilee he dealt with one of the grossest ones of them all. Leprosy. Jesus heals ten people, but only one of them felt compelled to return to Jesus to say thank you. Why is that? My hope is that this time will help us unlock the power of gratitude in our own lives and infuse the way we serve, give, and live.

Please open up with me to Luke 17:11-19 and let us read this story of the Ten Healed from Leprosy.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

According to WebMd, "leprosy is an infectious disease that causes severe, disfiguring skin sores and nerve damage to the arms, legs, and skin areas of the body. It's been around since ancient times, often around terrifying stigmas and tales of leprosy patients being shunned as outcasts. You can catch it only if you come into close and repeated contact with nose and mouth droplets from someone with untreated leprosy.

It is caused by a slow growing bacteria that takes about 3-5 years of incubation until symptoms started to appear. Today, it can be cured with antibiotics.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Marisa Iati, “Optimists’ Lease on Life is Longer,” *The Columbian Newspaper*, September 1, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.webmd.com/skin-problems-and-treatments/guide/leprosy-symptoms-treatments-history#1>

Leprosy was and is a terrible disease. In Biblical days, it resulted not only in a lot of pain and disfiguration, but also a loss of lifestyle, income, social stature, and relationships as you had to leave your home and live in communes with other infected folks. In other words, you lost everything.

The word leprosy appears 55 times in the Old Testament and 13 times in the New Testament. Clearly it was an important topic of consideration. The Book of Leviticus Chapters 13 and 14 provided “The Law of the Leper” which was a set of very strict social rules to prevent the spread of leprosy within a community. It also required the local priest to diagnose, heal, and determine whether or not someone was “clean” or “unclean.” [I am so glad we don’t have to do this today!]

In the Old Testament, famous characters with leprosy included Moses and Aaron’s sister, Miriam. Naaman the Syrian who was a captain of the Syrian Army. And King Uzziah. Apparently leprosy wasn’t a respecter of persons and didn’t care who you were or what resources you had at your disposal. The outcome regardless of who you were was the same...being outcast from the community.

In our scripture, Jesus encounters ten such men with leprosy. They certainly must have known who he was and what Jesus could do for them because they left the confine of their quarantined community to go out and meet him. They had a need. And Jesus had the cure. When you are desperate, you’ll do whatever it takes to bring that need to the one who can heal. And they were certainly willing to break “The Law of the Leper” to ensure that their needs would be filled.

And yet, notice how they stood off at a distance and called out in a loud voice! “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

Matthew and Mark told a different story about Jesus’ interaction with a leper. “And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.”<sup>6</sup>

So in this story, the leper comes near, but in today’s they stay off at a distance. Yet Jesus heals them all. Luke draws attention to the fact that only one guy returns to say thank you.

Why is that?

Part of the reason, as with the Parable of the Ten Talents, this story is about the heart and why even though we may feel grateful, we rarely express those feelings to others.

Ok, so let’s give these ten guys the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they were stuck for so long in their negative thinking. For some it might have been years that they struggled with this illness.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:40-42; Matthew 8:2-3

Maybe they were so used to being outcasts that they were struggling with how to integrate back into society.

Maybe they were just so caught up reconnecting with loved ones that they were distracted from saying thanks.

When you've been down in the dumps for so long and focusing on what you do not have, it's not always an automatic switch to being grateful.

The Apostle Paul understood that. In his letter to the Philippians he addressed some difficult issues plaguing the church. Division. Some people weren't living like God's people. Good, faithful people struggled to get along.

And yet Paul challenged them that there comes a time when you need to make a choice regarding your perspective. Will you continue to live like a victim or will you reclaim and reframe your life? Can you move from "The glass is half empty to being half full?"

Paul exhorts, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about what you don't have, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

Author Janice Kaplan in her book *The Gratitude Diaries* suggest to do three simple things when we're needing to reframe looking at a particular situation or person.<sup>8</sup>

Find a reason at least once a day to say "Thank you."

Focus on the positives instead of the problems.

Tell people why you appreciate them.

The article in *The Columbian* further reported, "Not a natural optimist? There's good news: The mindset is about 25 percent hereditary, meaning people have some control over their level of good thoughts."

The Apostle Paul encouraged the Romans, "That reframing or renewing of ones mind by not conforming to the negative patterns of the world could actually be an act of worship."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Philippians 4:4-9

<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries*.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 12:2

“To be more positive, common advice includes thinking about things you can be grateful for, doing one nice thing a day for someone else, socializing with positive people, being physically active, spending more time outdoors and smiling more.”<sup>10</sup>

Notice how this one leper when he is healed he isn’t afraid to praise God and to let everyone else know what had happened. He “threw himself” at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And this man wasn’t even a Jew. He was a Samaritan. He sets the example for the rest of us who should know better.

Do we throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet in gratitude when God does great things for us?

Do we focus on what we have instead of what we do not?

Do we consider everything we have as a gift from God?

Do we sometimes struggle with considering difficult people in our lives as gifts? If so, what if we began to look for the good in them instead?

I wonder how these simple things might change our perspectives and help us live longer and more fulfilling lives!

So may we reframe the way we look at everything through more positive lenses. May we come to see that everyone is beautifully and wonderfully made in God’s image, no matter how flawed. And may we express our gratitude more often to God and to those around us!

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Searing, "Really Optimistic? You Just Might Live Longer. Study: Optimists 50 to 70 percent more like to reach age 85." *The Columbian Newspaper*. Sunday September 1, 2019.