

IS THANKSGIVING IDOLATRY?

Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving

November 24, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for Thanksgiving comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 17, verses 11 through 19. It is on page 741 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 17, beginning at verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

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

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is Thanksgiving all about? As the title of the day suggests, it might be about giving thanks. But let's take a step back and evaluate what we prioritize on Thanksgiving. Suppose someone has never heard the word "thanksgiving" before. They have no idea what it means. And in order to figure out what Thanksgiving Day is all about, they simply watch us. They observe what we do. They don't interact with us. They don't ask any questions. They simply observe us. They're like a fly on the wall. What would they conclude about Thanksgiving? What's it all about?

I came up with four basic elements they would conclude about Thanksgiving. They might not all apply to you, but maybe some of them do. First, it's about gathering with family or friends. Second, it's about stuffing our faces with a whole bunch of food, especially turkey for some reason I don't really understand. Third, it's about napping on the couch while a couple teams you don't care about play football. And, fourth, it's about shopping. Or, if you're like me and you don't like crowds, I just look through all of the Black Friday circulars and think about what I would buy if I did go shopping.

These four elements might not all apply to you, but this, in my experience, is the typical liturgy of Thanksgiving Day: gathering, eating, napping, and shopping. And none of these things are bad, although the eating might border on gluttony, and the shopping usually becomes materialism, both of which are really idolatry. So these things could become sins, but they don't have to.

But is this what Thanksgiving is about? I think we recognize easily enough that it's not what Thanksgiving is *supposed* to be about. But the fly on the wall is probably right.

The word "thanksgiving" gets us a little closer to what Thanksgiving is really about, but it doesn't get us all the way there. From the title itself we might conclude that Thanksgiving is

IS THANKSGIVING IDOLATRY? (Luke 17:11-19)

about being thankful. This sounds better. Even if there's nothing wrong with gathering, eating, napping, and shopping, being thankful just sounds more pious.

So maybe your Thanksgiving liturgy includes a time of giving thanks. When I was growing up, our family liturgy included this right before the dinner. I didn't really like it, partly because I was hungry, but mostly because I would have to share. But it was a good practice, because it helped to cultivate thankfulness.

Maybe your family does something similar. It's a good practice, but it doesn't always go the way it should. I'll give you a sample Thanksgiving speech. Try to figure out what's wrong. And this is probably pretty close to what I said when I was a kid: "I'm thankful for my family, a warm house, and ... my Legos."

What's wrong with it? There might be a few problems. For one thing, all the gifts are temporal. They're all good gifts, but none of them are spiritual. It doesn't mention the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, or the gift of the Holy Spirit. But here's the bigger problem: It gives thanks *for* things, but it doesn't give thanks *to* anyone. If I had said, "I thank *God* for my family, a warm house, and my Legos," that would be a good Thanksgiving speech. It wouldn't be as good as it could be. But it would be good, because it directs thanks to the true source. But when we omit the source it actually reveals a deep-seated idolatry. This might sound surprising. Listing what we're thankful for doesn't really seem like idolatry, at least not at first, so let me explain.

Idolatry is the worship of false gods. And this has to do with the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me." The Small Catechism explains this very well by saying, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

The heart has often been called an "idol factory." And this is very insightful. Any number of things can become idols to us: money, our homes, food, family, toys, and many other things or people. Our idols are those things or people that we come to delight in and trust in more than the one true God. And it's not even wrong to delight or trust in things, not when they are truly delightful and trustworthy. Idolatry occurs when we fear, love, or trust anything or anyone above the one true God. So when we make Thanksgiving speeches where we state what we are thankful *for* without mentioning the giver of those gifts, this reveals our deep-seated idolatry. So if I say, "I'm thankful for my family, a warm house, and my Legos," what am I really loving, and what am I trusting? It's my family, house, and Legos.

Now we might think, *Well, it's sort of implied that you're thanking God for these things.* Maybe. But God deserves more than an unstated implication in our Thanksgiving speeches. When God goes unmentioned, it reveals that our focus is really on the gifts, not the giver. And if I focus on the gifts instead of the giver, I turn the gifts into my gods, and I render praise to the gifts. This is idolatry.

So it's incredibly ironic that Thanksgiving, a day intended to give thanks to God for his manifold goodness, probably more often becomes a day for idolatry. We remind ourselves that we have much to be thankful for, and this is true, but then we focus on all the things we should be thankful for, and this quickly turns into idolatry. Do you see what I mean? We think about all the good things we have been given, and we basically spend the day worshipping those things. Our thanksgiving needs to have an object. That is, our thanks needs to be directed to the proper source: the Triune God.

So here's a practical tip for you: After the sermon, when we give you a chance to share a testimony of thanksgiving, or if you have a time of sharing in your home liturgy, make sure you thank God for the things you are thankful for. And this is the proper way to appreciate and enjoy

IS THANKSGIVING IDOLATRY? (Luke 17:11-19)

the many good things in life, because God does give us good things. We simply recognize and acknowledge that they are gifts from God, for he is the source of every good gift. Make it a testimony of God's goodness.

So Thanksgiving is not really about gathering, eating, napping, and shopping. It's not even about being thankful. It's about the Triune God. "Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights" (James 1:17). The Father gives us good gifts because of his grace to us in Jesus Christ, which is delivered to us by the Holy Spirit. Thanksgiving is about God. And, primarily, it is about Jesus Christ, because his sacrifice on our behalf is the reason the Father gives us good things.

This is one of the things we see in the gospel lesson about these ten lepers. And this text is absolutely fascinating. It's one of those texts where, when we stop and think about it and meditate on it, there are some clever little details that emerge.

On the surface, it comes across as a lesson in thankfulness. Of the ten lepers, only one is thankful enough to return and give thanks to Jesus. The lesson goes like this: *This Samaritan was thankful, and Jesus commended him for that; therefore, we should be thankful too.* That's a fine lesson, but it's not really the point. It's really about Jesus. The behavior of the Samaritan who returns to give thanks to Jesus emphasizes this. If you ask the Samaritan what this is all about, I guarantee you he would say, "Jesus." He knows that this isn't about his thankfulness. He knows that it's not even about being cured of leprosy. He recognizes that it's about God taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and coming to save us. That's why he returns to give thanks to Jesus. And he does more than simply give thanks. He falls down on his face at Jesus' feet. This is an important detail. This is a posture of worship. And the only person who can accept praise like this without sinning is God. Even angels refuse to let people bow before them (Rev. 19:10; 22:9). But the Samaritan who used to be a leper renders this praise to Jesus, and Jesus accepts it. It reveals that Jesus is God in human flesh. The text isn't really about thankfulness. It's about Jesus. And when we recognize the goodness of Jesus, then we are moved to thanksgiving.

So what's so fascinating about this text? Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. And that sounds kind of familiar. Much of Jesus' ministry occurs while he is on the way to Jerusalem and the cross. These events reveal what Jesus is going to Jerusalem to do. He is going there to cleanse us from the leprosy of sin.

Leprosy was a skin disease. It's mostly eradicated today. It's also curable. But in the ancient world it wasn't. It's an infection that causes your body to waste away. It's mostly seen on the skin, but it affects everything. It attacks the nervous system too, so you don't really feel it. Apparently your arm or leg could be dying and you wouldn't feel much. Because of this, the early Church fathers recognized it as a good metaphor for sin. It's a death that spreads throughout us, and it's so bad that we don't even realize what's happening. So Jesus cleansing these lepers is a sign of what he is going to Jerusalem to accomplish. He goes there to cleanse us from the leprosy of sin.

On his way to Jerusalem, he's passing between Galilee and Samaria. Eventually he will arrive in the region of Judea. That's where Jerusalem is. Both Galilee and Judea were Jewish regions, but they were separated by the region of Samaria. And the Samaritans were part Israelite, like the Jews, but their ancestors intermarried with foreigners. So the Jews considered Samaritans to not be true Israelites.

IS THANKSGIVING IDOLATRY? (Luke 17:11-19)

And of these ten lepers, one of them is a Samaritan. But based on what Jesus says at the end, several of the others, perhaps all of them, were Jews (17:18).

The lepers kept their distance from Jesus. This was the law. They were excluded from the rest of society for fear they might be contagious. Jesus had gone up and touched lepers before, but that was his choice. Here he doesn't. The healing happens in another way, a way that emphasizes his divine power. They ask Jesus to have mercy, and he simply says, **“Go and show yourselves to the priests”** (17:14). Then, as they're going to the priests, they are cleansed (17:14). Jesus isn't even there when it happens, but it happens because of his Word. This is really quite amazing.

The Samaritan leper, when he saw that he was healed, stopped and came back to Jesus. He thanks Jesus and worships him as God. And Jesus commends him for this.

In comparison to the Samaritan leper, the nine others kind of get a bad rap, but I don't think this is really fair. First, they acted on faith when they set out to show themselves to the priests. They weren't cleansed yet, but they believed Jesus' word and started out on their journey. And it wasn't a short journey. They had to walk from the northern border of Samaria all the way to Jerusalem. This was about fifty miles as the crow flies, but much farther as you had to wind around hills and mountains and rivers. A couple of these guys may have been severely disabled too. They wouldn't be disabled for very long, but at the start they were. So this was a big commitment to make based solely on the word of Jesus. So they all demonstrated faith at his word.

And then, when they were healed and continued on their way to Jerusalem, they're simply doing what Jesus told them to do. We can't be too hard on them for that.

And their arrival at the temple in Jerusalem would have prepared the way for Jesus to follow. Remember, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem too; he's just taking his time along the way to teach and heal. So Jesus is probably just a few days behind them. And imagine the reaction of the priests when these nine lepers get there. I suppose they saw lepers show up once in a while. Whenever a leper was cleansed—whether the healing was natural or supernatural—the priest had to examine the person and offer sacrifices for their ceremonial cleansing. But it was probably just one leper at a time. Having nine of them show up at the same time, all being perfectly healed, would have been quite remarkable. It would have been proof to the priests, as well as everyone in Jerusalem, of Jesus' supernatural power. So there's a positive purpose to these nine lepers continuing on to Jerusalem.

So we don't want to be too hard on them. They demonstrated both faith and obedience, but their faith was not complete. They lacked the content of the Samaritan's faith. The nine recognized Jesus as a miracle worker, and this is true. But the Samaritan recognized Jesus as the Great High Priest and God in human flesh. The nine had an accurate faith, but the Samaritan had a complete faith.

If we think about this text simply in terms of obedience, we might conclude that the Samaritan was disobedient because he didn't show himself to the priests. But this is false. And this is one of the clever little details in here. He did show himself to a priest, but he didn't have to go to Jerusalem to do it. He showed himself to the Great High Priest. And there was a sacrifice offered for this Samaritan's cleansing, but it wasn't the birds and lambs prescribed in Leviticus (14:1-32). It was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

So at the end, Jesus doesn't tell this Samaritan to finish the trip to Jerusalem. He doesn't say, “Thanks for thanking me; now go show yourself to the priests.” He says, **“Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well”** (17:19). He doesn't have to go to Jerusalem, and he doesn't have

IS THANKSGIVING IDOLATRY? (Luke 17:11-19)

to offer a sacrifice. All of that is completed in his return to Jesus. Jesus is both his priest and his sacrifice. The Samaritan trusted Jesus for everything. He recognized Jesus, not merely as a miracle worker, but as his God. He trusted him for salvation, and he was saved.

So the text isn't really about thankfulness. It's about Jesus. And when we recognize who Jesus is and what he has done for us, then we see the true object of our thankfulness. For this Jesus was not simply the Samaritan leper's God. He is your God. And he is your Great High Priest. And he is your sacrifice. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.