

# CHRISTIAN THANKSGIVING

Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving

November 27, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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

<sup>11</sup> On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup> And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance <sup>13</sup> and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." <sup>14</sup> When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. <sup>15</sup> Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; <sup>16</sup> and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? <sup>18</sup> Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" <sup>19</sup> And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

*Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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Thanksgiving is a time for looking back. We look back upon the last year. Where were you this time last year? For me, on the Wednesday evening before Thanksgiving, I was literally right here, doing the same thing I am now. Some of you are too. You might even be sitting in the same pew you were last year. And that shows that our Father in heaven has protected and preserved us this last year. And perhaps we expected he would, but we didn't see it yet.

But I really mean the question more generally; where were you last year? Did you know what this last year would hold for you? Did you have everything you needed for this year? Maybe, maybe not. Or maybe you felt like you did, but we never really know that. Even if we feel secure, as if we have more than just our daily bread, but also our monthly bread or even yearly bread stocked up, those things can easily be taken away. When we look just at the natural world, we never really know if we will have what we will need tomorrow or the day after. We stockpile money and goods, thinking that we will be secure, but those things can easily be taken away. And as we look ahead to the next year, we don't know what will happen. We don't know what will happen in the world. And there's a lot of fear about that; too much fear. We don't know what will happen in our lives. And we fear that too. Whether we are rich or poor, all of us are really in the same boat. We depend on our heavenly Father for our daily bread.

So when we look back on the last year, we should see the ways God has provided for our needs. This was the focus of the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 8. The LORD, Yahweh, had brought the Israelites through the wilderness. Deuteronomy was written and preached right at the end of the Israelite's forty years in the wilderness. It was to prepare them to go into the land God was giving to them. The LORD said, "The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and

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possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers” (8:1). It sounds a little redundant, but the LORD commanded them to keep his commandments. Why? Because he had proven his faithfulness to them. He asked them to remember the previous forty years and how he provided for them. He allowed them to hunger, for just a little bit, and then he fed them with manna. Their clothing did not wear out, which is remarkable when you consider that they spent forty years living in the wilderness. Yahweh fed them, clothed them, sheltered them, and protected them from their enemies. He proved his faithfulness to them. So he instructed them to remember, when they came into the fertile land of Canaan, that it was still him who protects and provides for them. The miracle bread from heaven would stop when the earth produced fruit, but it was still the LORD providing for them. He just used different means. Therefore, they should keep his commandments and remember him. If he has proven himself trustworthy, they should trust that his commandments are good for them, and not burdensome. They should walk by faith, trusting Yahweh and obeying his commands.

So we should also look back upon the ways that the same LORD has provided for us. Thus far, he has helped us. And if the Lord has proven himself trustworthy, we should trust that he will continue to protect and provide for us, we should trust that his commandments are good for us, and we should trust him for our salvation.

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We have an excellent example of thanksgiving in the gospel lesson from Luke 17. And it comes from a little bit of an unlikely source. Or, at least, that’s how it looked at the time. Of the ten lepers who were healed, the only one to return and give thanks to Jesus was a Samaritan.

At that time in Israel, there was hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. They were related. They were all Israelites, being descended from Jacob. But about 750 years before this, the Israelites in Samaria intermarried with foreigners. So the Jews considered them much more as foreigners than as fellow Israelites. Jesus even calls him a foreigner, though he says it to commend the man (17:18). There was also the belief among the Jews that if someone had some kind of physical illness or deformity, it must be a punishment from God for something they had done. So here’s this Samaritan leper. Jews, especially, would have seen him as less than.

Leprosy is a skin disease. It’s less common today than it was in the ancient world. It’s also curable now. But it was a bad thing to get in ancient times. Sufferers develop lesions or splotches on their skin. It also causes nerve damage, which eventually leads to paralysis and even the loss of limbs if not treated. It’s curable now. But in the ancient world, it was not. And since it affected the skin, it was pretty obvious, just by looking at a person, that they had it. So nobody wanted lepers around. They were banished from cities and had to live in colonies with other lepers.

In terms of religious life, the Law of Moses declared them unclean (Lev. 13:2-3). And I should emphasize that to be unclean under the Law of Moses did not mean that a person had sinned in some way to become unclean. It was not intended to be a moral judgment on the person. A person could become unclean through no fault of their own. It simply meant that they were excluded from the temple during the time of their uncleanness. However, the Jews did eventually attach a moral judgment to it, especially for things like leprosy. So this Samaritan leper seemed like an unlikely person to become the model of thanksgiving for us. But there he is.

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He’s a model of thanksgiving for us, because he recognizes the true gift. Think about this: what is he most excited about, being healed or Jesus? He’s most excited about Jesus. He recognizes that the giver is more significant than the gift. Therefore, the giver is the true gift.

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There's a subtle idolatry that can creep into our thanksgiving celebrations. It is good that we have a national holiday that reminds us to be thankful. So I certainly don't want to criticize that. But there's a difference between being thankful *for something* and being thankful *to someone*. When you list all the things you are thankful for, how does that go? Do you simply list the things you have that you like, or do you direct that thanks toward someone? If we don't direct our thanks toward someone, we're kind of just thanking the stuff for the enjoyment we get out of it.

The world's thanksgiving is rather generic. They talk about thankfulness or having an attitude of gratitude. But it's not very specific. They don't say, "Give thanks to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." And we shouldn't expect the world to do that. But I don't know how you have a Thanksgiving without a god. They just say, "Give thanks." To whom? I don't know. But if you don't direct your thanks to someone, you're kind of just taking stock of how wealthy you are. And that's idolatry instead of thanksgiving. Think about the way you react when someone gives you a gift. Where does your attention go: to the thing or to the person who gave it to you? Do we think, *Wow! What a great widget?* Or do we think, *Wow! What a great person for giving this to me?* We see this with kids when we give them gifts at Christmas or birthdays. And I don't really blame them; we were all like this; maybe we still are. They open something exciting, and you ask them, "Who gave that to you?" And they might say, "I don't know, but it's just what I've always wanted!" That's not thankfulness. That's idolatry. True thankfulness directs its attention to the person who has done something for us.

So what is Christian Thanksgiving? It's not just taking stock of everything we have and realizing that we're all quite wealthy. It's recognizing that our Father in heaven has created us and abundantly provided for all the needs of our life. It's trusting that he will continue to do so. And it's directing our worship toward him in thankfulness. It's remembering that our Savior, Jesus Christ, purchased us with his holy and precious blood. It's trusting that our sins are, therefore, forgiven, and we will be raised on the Last Day. And it's directing our worship toward him in thankfulness. It's recognizing that the Holy Spirit has called us to faith. It's trusting that he will continue to strengthen and preserve our faith and guard us from evil. And it's directing our worship toward him in thankfulness. So this Thanksgiving, don't just say, "I have a lot to be thankful for." Rather, say, "I have a great God to be thankful to." Take your eyes off the stuff. Take your eyes off yourself. Direct your attention and your worship to the Triune God.

You know all that stuff, it's going to rust, or decay, or burn up. That is, if it doesn't just break first. But your God endures forever. And he is capable, for all eternity, to provide for you and protect you.

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So think about this guy, this Samaritan leper. What was his deal? Why did he come back to worship Jesus?

I don't want to be too hard on the other nine. They're really just doing what Jesus told them to do, "**Go and show yourselves to the priests**" (17:14). That's because the priests were the ones who would examine a person and declare them clean so that they could reenter society (Lev. 14:1-32). So they're all on their way to Jerusalem and the temple. But Jesus criticizes them, "**Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?**" (17:17-18). Why not? They, apparently, don't see things the same way as the one.

Imagine this with me. They were not healed instantly, but while they were going to the priests, they were cleansed (17:14). So they're all together, walking, when they realize that they have been healed of their leprosy. And one guy turns back to see Jesus again, and he praises God

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loudly. Now the other nine have a choice. They see and hear the one guy turn back, and they could go with him, but they don't. If nobody returns, maybe we can let them off the hook for just not thinking about it. But when the one guy sets a good example, the others do not follow. So what do they really care about? The nine care about being cleansed. And I can't really blame them. I mean, they've been banished from their homes and families for as long as they've had this disease. I'd want to get cleared by the priests and back home as fast as possible too.

But the one guy recognizes something even better than that. He recognizes that Jesus is God. More than just being thankful, he sees Jesus for who he truly is. He "praise[ed] God with a loud voice" (17:15). "He fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks" (17:16). This posture of falling down at Jesus feet is a posture of worship. It is reserved for God alone. The nine were happy that they had been healed. The one was happy that he had found God. And this is so much better.

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If we just take stock of what we have and realize that we have a lot, that doesn't really give us any hope for the future. We might be able to say, "So far, things have been okay," but we can also look around us and see who's not here. And if we think about it only in terms of the world, it's obvious that, someday, everything will not be okay. Just because we're still here for another year does not mean we will be here next year. But when we recognize that "thus far the LORD has helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12), then we can have hope for the future. He has given us our daily bread in this life, and he has promised to care for us into eternity. And since he has proved himself faithful thus far, we can be confident that he will continue his faithfulness.

So Christian Thanksgiving is more than just thanking God for what he has done so far, but it's also trusting him to do everything he has promised for us. So it's more than just daily bread. It's more than just home, family, good friends, seasonable weather, and good government. Christian Thanksgiving, above all those things, is about forgiveness of sins through Jesus' blood, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the Sacraments, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life in the new creation, because all those things are as certain as the bread you ate yesterday. Our Triune God is faithful. So we give him thanks for everything he has done, is doing, and will do. Amen.

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