

Fifty Yards from Life

You Asked For It, Part 2

Luke 17:11-19

I was at the grocery store the other day . . . by the way, I happen to like going to grocery store . . . it's like a puzzle that can be solved in less than an hour; it's like hunting for clues in a maze of long aisles . . . they sell doughnuts in there too – that's where you got to go to get them.

Anyway, I watched this 5 year old yell at his haggard mother with ever growing intensity that he wanted something from the candy section. I was waiting in a different line – but the five year old was pitching a fit right there by the cashier where they put all that candy.

Have you noticed that? They put it right there so every kid can see it – at eye level! It cascades in rows all the way down to the floor.

That's not an accident.

Well, he was stamping his feet – “I want it . . . I want it . . . I want it!” His face was red . . . his mother was tired and embarrassed.

She finally caved in and gave him the candy; and you know what, that kid never said thank you . . . she didn't even try making him either . . . he just grabbed it out of her hand and sort of huffed at her.

I left my cart and walked over to their aisle and grabbed that kid by his shirt collar and said, “Young man, what do you think you ought to be saying to your mother right about now?”

I didn't actually do that, but I wanted to.”

I wanted to take his candy bar away and eat it right in front of his face . . . there's a dark side to me.

Haven't you've ever wanted to make someone say, “Thank you?” Or wished they would?

I remember reading about a guy who held the door for a woman so she could walk through before

him. She refused to say thank you . . . she just sort of stuck her nose in the air, but after she walked through the doorway she turned to him and said, with this air of condescending ingratitude, “You didn't need to hold the door for me just because I'm a lady.” He said, “No, I held the door for you because I'm a gentleman.”

I'd love to use that sometime.

Cicero, the Roman statesman and philosopher said that there was one character trait that was not only the greatest of virtues; it was the parent of every other virtue.ⁱ

It happens to be the quality of gratitude.

According to the inspired word of God, regardless of what others might say about, it is indeed that quality of life which should distinctively separate the believer from the unbeliever.

In fact, one of the marks of the unbeliever, Paul wrote to Timothy was the simple fact that they are ungrateful (**2 Timothy 3:2**).

He even wrote to the Roman believers that an unthankful spirit will mark the lowest rung of depravity, among other things, in a digressing culture (**Romans 1**)

Isn't it true that a mark of maturity and grace is the ability to say thank you?

There's something unsettling about ingratitude. We can sense the void . . . sometimes we can even sense the pain of someone not thanked in return for what they did.

So how do we resist it . . . and how do we respond to it, when it lands on the doorstep of our own hearts?

Let me show you an encounter where we're given the answer to both.

Turn to *Luke 17* where you actually hear ask a question related to the lack of gratitude – a question directed at our own hearts today.

Luke 17 . . . notice verse 11. While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. 12. As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; 13. And they raised their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

Before we go any farther, let me take you back to this scene so that we can appreciate their situation.

If you were writing the biography of a leper, living in Israel, you could easily entitle the book, “Hopeless.”

The Greek term translated “leprosy” was a broad term for a wide range of skin diseases – not just what we would call today, Hansen’s Disease.ⁱⁱ

Any kind of rash or skin disease would have been immediately inspected by the priests. If leprosy was confirmed, the individual would have been immediately put outside the village or town, away from the possibility of coming into contact in any way with any other member of society, including his own family.ⁱⁱⁱ

He would effectively be considered banned from the fellowship of God and by virtue of God’s displeasure he would have lost all personal and intimate contact with everyone else.

While by this time in redemptive history, leprosy wasn’t necessarily the direct judgment of God, it still was considered so; being reintroduced into society and considered clean still included validation by a Jewish priest.

In the meantime, a leper was literally banished from society. One author called it a social death sentence.^{iv}

We know from history that a leper couldn’t get any closer to another human being than 50 yards.^v

He would have said farewell to his wife. He would have watched his children grow up at a distance. He would be unable to help his kids and his family, much less hug them close.

He literally lived 50 yards away from life. 50 yards from relationships . . . 50 yards from happiness and fellowship . . . he would always be about 50 yards away from everything he longed for and hoped for.

And there would be no hope in sight.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian wrote that the leper in no way differed from a corpse; he

wrote, the cure of a leper was considered tantamount to raising of the dead.^{vi}

In other words, only God could cure a leper.

And God just so happened to be walking by.

Luke records here in *verse 12* that they’re standing at a distance – my guess it’s about 50 yards . . . and they’re called out, “*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*”

I have no doubt that these lepers had already heard the story where Jesus had healed a leper 3 years earlier (*Luke 5*) . . . maybe he could do it again.

The mood of this imperative could be expressed in our language with the word, “Please.”^{vii}

This is a begging . . . crying . . . lamenting . . . please . . . oh, please . . . Jesus, Master . . . have mercy on us, please!”

Jesus immediately responds to them with a command – notice *verse 14, When He saw them, He said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”*

This is *interesting*.

He doesn’t prescribe medicine; some kind of washing; some outward action.^{viii}

He doesn’t touch them, get near them, wave His hand over them; tell them to pray; make some promises; repent; quote the 10 commandments; buy new clothes, wash their hair brush their teeth . . . none of that.

He simply says, “Go see the priests.”

They could have easily said to Him, “Um . . . why would we do that?”

We’re not allowed within 50 yards of a priest – they can get leprosy too, you know . . . they’re not going to be all that happy to see us.”

Listen, the only reason they would go and see the priest was if they’d been healed!

The priest would have offered ceremonial sacrifices for 8 days, pronounced them clean and reintroduced them to society (*Leviticus 14*)

But would you notice – they’re not healed yet. Jesus commands they go to the priest and they’re still covered with leprosy.

It’s only when they obey that we read, *verse 14, “But as they were going, they were cleansed.”*

As they were in the middle of obeying His word, they benefited from the power of His word.

In other words, they were called by Jesus to exercise tremendous faith in His word alone.

How about us? Do we act only when we see evidence, or do we act out of obedience before seeing any evidence?

Is our faith so strong that we will act on what God is saying even before we see any evidence of what God is doing?^{xix}

All 10 lepers are to be commended for trusting and acting on the word of Christ.

And all 10 are healed . . . they probably can't believe it.

We're not told how far down the road they went before the leprosy left their bodies – maybe it faded away as they walked – or maybe it suddenly disappeared – but we do know it wouldn't have been long they realized the leprosy was gone.

They didn't have any mirrors, but they could see the effects of the miracle on each other.^x

You would have seen them on that road jumping up and down for joy; hugging each other, perhaps even crying, and then running – not walking – running to find the nearest priest as fast as their newly healed bodies could run.

Warren Wiersbe writes in his commentary on this text, "What they should have done is form an impromptu men's choir and sung together . . .

Bless the Lord, O my soul

And all that is within me

Bless His holy name . . .

You healed all my diseases . . .

You brought me up out of the pit.

(Psalm 103)

Oh but how easy is it to enjoy the gift and forget the giver.^{xi}

You might think we're being too hard on them to think they should have all immediately returned to thank Jesus.

Jesus thought they should have, as we'll see in a moment.

Well, why didn't they? We're not told.

For just a moment, use your imagination and you might discover something of yourself in them.

One of them might have been a **literalist** – after all Jesus did say to go to the priest; and He didn't actually ask for any expression of gratitude; I mean if Jesus wanted to be thanked, He should have arranged the miracle to make it clear and at least walked over to where they were.

This is the kind of person who says, "I'm not going to spend time thanking people because A. they're just doing their job; B. they should be willing to do it without being thanked; and C. I'm

paying for it in some way or another and D. It's not a crime if I don't thank them. I'm following the letter of the law . . . never mind the spirit and the heart.

Another leper could have been a **procrastinator** who said to himself as he ran down that road, "You know, I really ought to go back and thank Jesus, but I can always come back tomorrow."

Perhaps another leper was **timid and introverted** and the last thing he'd want to do is go back to that village and the crowd that is no doubt swarming around Jesus; and to publically express gratitude – I mean, that would be way too conspicuous and just too embarrassing – and besides, look at my clothes and my hair – maybe another time will be more convenient and less obvious to others.

Another leper might have been an **egotist** – and it's about time I got the healing I deserve and now it was time to get out of life what I've missed all these years – and it's all about me!

Another leper could have been a **pessimist** who said as he ran faster and faster down the road, "I know I've been healed but it probably isn't going to last."

And the other four lepers were simply **conformists** who went along with the other lepers and since only one guy had turned back around to find Jesus, they decided to stick with the crowd.^{xii}

So . . . only one leper returned to thank this Man who effectively raised them from the dead.

Verse 15. Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice.

I love the original language here – glorifying God with a loud voice – phone megale (φωνη μεγαλη) – which gives us our word mega phone.^{xiii}

This guy pulls out the megaphone of praise and let's Jesus have it full blast!

Like the woman Pastor Charles Spurgeon was witnessing to in London during his ministry through the 1800's – and as she began to understand the gospel she began to get so excited and she said, "Oh Mr. Spurgeon, if Jesus Christ saves me He will never heard the end of it."^{xiv}

This leper isn't going to let Jesus hear the end of it.

He falls down, verse 16, on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him –earlier he's giving thanks to God – they are one and the same.

He's thanking Jesus, the representative of God on earth – tantamount to believing in Jesus as his Lord, Messiah.

And then Jesus asks a question . . . three of them actually, one after the other; notice *verse 17*. *Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine – where are they? Was no one found who returned to give glory God, except this foreigner* – this Samaritan? And He said to him, “Stand up and go; your faith has made you well.”

Not only well physically, which comes and goes and eventually dies; but well, spiritually, which never goes away and leads to everlasting life.

By the way, would you notice Jesus didn't say to him, “*Stand up and go, your gratitude has made you well.*” No . . . *your faith* – your faith in Me – the Messiah – has cleansed you not just of physical leprosy, but spiritual leprosy as well.

It would be easy to miss the pain in the heart of Jesus as He asks these questions.

Greek scholars point out the fact that Jesus, fully God, yet fully man, asked three different questions to underscore His hurt.

Were there not 10 cleansed? Where are the nine?

Can you imagine being one of those lepers and finding out Jesus asked why you didn't come back?

Could it be that our Lord even now would remark that we never do seem to thank Him for what He's done and what He's doing?

It would be easy to miss some wonderful observations about how to respond to ingratitude.

Did you notice how Jesus handled the pain of ingratitude?

Responding to Ingratitude

Let me make two observations.

1. First, He responded with genuine humility.

Jesus knew who those 9 guys were . . . He knew where they were at that very moment on that dirt road.

He could have waved His hand and said, “Well, if that's the case . . . you 9 are getting your leprosy back . . . and you're going to have it twice as bad.” Jesus didn't demand gratitude from them – He still acted on their behalf with grace – even though their ingratitude pained Him deeply.

If Jesus had a 1-to-1 system going – I'll do one thing for you and if you thank Me I'll do another thing for you . . . and if you forget to thank me, that's it for the day.

Listen, if that's how Jesus began to operate in our lives, we'd all be in real trouble.

Instead, He daily loads us down with benefits (Psalm 68:19) and we never even recognized half of them as we race down the road of our lives . . . and those benefits we do recognize are rarely turned into professions of praise.

Which is why we're quicker to pray for what we don't have than we are to praise Him for what we do have.^{xv}

Which would be tantamount to one of those lepers racing down the road and thinking, “If the Lord really cared about me, He would have given me new clothes to see the priest and new sandals because this dirt road is killing my feet.”

Jesus expressed great humility in helping 9 lepers – and don't miss the fact that He already knew wouldn't come back – it still hurt Him; which makes His grace and humility even greater.

How do you respond to ingratitude? Like Jesus – with great humility.

2. Secondly, He revealed a greater motive

Did you notice that Jesus never made a personal demand for anyone to actually thank Him? Notice again, the real desire for gratitude – *verse 18*. *Was no one found who returned to give glory to God.*

Jesus wanted His Father glorified – which is a greater and higher motive for doing something for someone else.

If we truly want God glorified, we may be hurt and pained at ingratitude, but we did it for God to begin with, right? And the pleasure of serving God for the glory of God will remain with us and sustain us and encourage us even if nobody else does.

How do you respond to ingratitude?

How do you, as Martin Luther, the reformer, once wrote – how do you learn to practice the virtue of suffering ingratitude?^{xvi}

Like Christ – we observe here – responding with a greater motive and great humility.

Now let's flip the coin of our perspective over to the other side.

How do you resist ingratitude?

Let me make two suggestions.

1. First, take the time to think.

Instead of racing down the road to rejoin life as you want it, take time to think . . . what has God done . . . what is God doing?

Think about it.

Regardless of the obvious evidence, what might God be up to?

Delight in attempting to identify His hand in order to praise Him.

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom told about an incident that taught her further about giving thanks in everything. During World War II, she and her sister, Betsy, had been arrested by the Nazi's for harboring Jews and they were imprisoned at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. The barracks were extremely crowded and infested with fleas. One morning they read in their smuggled in, tattered, Bible from 1 Thessalonians the reminder to rejoice in all things. Betsy announced, "Well, we must also thank God for fleas." Corrie replied, "There is no way I am going to thank God for fleas." But Betsy was persuasive and the women actually thanked God for the fleas, even though they weren't sure why they should. During the months that followed, they discovered that their particular barracks was left relatively free from the guards and they could do Bible study, talk openly, and even pray in the barracks without fear of interference. They learned sometime later that it was a place of refuge for them, only because the guards wanted to avoid the fleas.^{xvii}

Take the time to think. What might God be up to, in spite of the evidence?

2. Secondly, take the time to thank.

Thanking requires thinking and thinking takes time and so does thanking.

A woman by the name of Francis Ridley Havergal jotted down every day on a little calendar she kept something – often a little thing - for which she thanked God.

She would say that it was her way of thinking and thanking.

Little wonder that she would write a hymn for the church that we are still singing more than 100 years later:

*Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to
Thee;
Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of
Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be, swift and beautiful for
Thee
Take my voice and let me sing always, only for my
King
Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I
withhold;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them – watch this – take my moments and my
days –
let them flow in ceaseless praise . . .
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

Thanking God takes time and so does thanking people.

Resist the undertow of ingratitude . . . think . . . and thank!

Our last assignment, in our last discussion was to write down the name of one person for whom you would begin praying for their salvation.

I believe our assignment for this study would be to think of one person to whom you can give a note of thanks. Start with the Lord – and then one other.

When's the last time you've thanked your friends, or your roommate, or your husband or your wife for things they do?

When's the last time you guys thanked your wife for dinner? "Honey that was delicious." If it wasn't delicious, you can say, "Honey, that . . . that was unforgettable."

Sit down and write a note or send an email or a text to someone who contributed in your life; someone from your past – someone in the present.

Someone who probably didn't know you even noticed; someone who did something for you but you knew it was really for God.

Someone who would probably be surprised and maybe a little tongue tied to find you coming back up their road with a simple message of gratitude.

Listen, if it encouraged the heart of Jesus Christ to hear it – if it pained Him to not hear it – can there be any doubt as to the good it will do each other.

Let's resist the natural pull of ingratitude.

Let's be the one person out of 10 – let's be that one person – marked by practicing the greatest – and perhaps the rarest – of all virtues – gratitude.

Simply saying – "Thank you."

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/27/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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- i Quoted in Richard Carl Hoefler, Will Daylight Come? (C.S.S. Publishing, 1979), p. 111
- ii Charles R. Swindoll, Insights on Luke (Zondervan, 2012), p. 410
- iii G. Campbell Morgan, The Great Physician (Revell, 1937), p. 101
- iv Swindoll, p. 410
- v William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 218
- vi David E. Garland, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke (Zondervan, 2011), p. 689
- vii J. Reiling & J. L. Swellengrebel, A Translators Handbook on the Gospel of Luke (UBS, 1971), p. 583
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- ix Bruce B. Barton, Life Application Bible: Luke (Tyndale, 1997), p. 400
- x R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 2 (Crossway, 1998), p. 170
- xi Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Courageous (Victor Books, 1989), p. 54
- xii Adapted from Hoefler, p. 117- 119
- xiii Reiling & Swellengrebel, p. 584
- xiv Hughes, p. 173
- xv Ryle, p. 234
- xvi Hoefler, p. 120
- xvii preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1998/april/2665.html