

**A Better Life: A Grateful Life**  
**Luke 17:11-19; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**  
**November 26, 2017**  
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My dad loved baseball. Being born and raised in New York, even after living in San Diego for the last 42 years of his life and trying to get excited about the Padres, at his core, he was a lifelong, true blue Yankee fan. The thing he loved almost as much as watching the Yankees play the game, was telling stories about it. And one of his favorite stories was about one of its most famous players.

On July 4, 1939, Yankee first baseman, Lou Gehrig, gave perhaps the most famous speech in the history of baseball. As he stood at a microphone at home plate in Yankee Stadium, on a day that was to honor his fabulous career, yet suffering from a horrible disease that would take his life in just a matter of months, he took time to remember and thank those who never played the game but made his career possible. He thanked the vendors, ticket takers and grounds crew. He even thanked his mother in law. He began with these words: "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." Imagine the character required to experience that much gratitude in that moment. "Gratitude is the gift God gives us that enables us to be blessed by all other gifts, the way our taste buds enable us to enjoy a delicious Thanksgiving meal. Without gratitude, our lives disintegrate into envy, dissatisfaction, and complaints, taking what we have for granted and leaving us always wanting more."<sup>1</sup> The story of the 10 lepers is also about an unlikely character, a Samaritan, expressing his gratitude.

Something important to remember is that in the New Testament, Samaritans were despised foreigners. When reading these stories today, we tend to miss the scandal this caused in Jesus' time. Those who heard Jesus speak compassionately towards Samaritans would have been confused if not downright angered. Samaritans were despised because of their mixed ethnicity. In order to get the full impact of these stories, when we hear Jesus speak of Samaritans, we need to imagine a deep disgust creeping into the hearts and minds of the listener. Samaritans were **those people** who lived on the other side of the border. **Those people** who should be kept out of the country. **Those people** with no path to citizenship. **Those People**.

This story is found only in Luke's Gospel and takes place as Jesus and his apostles are traveling through the region between Samaria and Galilee, toward Jerusalem. The lepers see Jesus approaching and while he's still at a distance they cry out, begging him to have mercy on them. They don't dare get too close. They know the rules. The laws of Moses, from the book of Leviticus, say that "a person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of the face and yell, "Unclean! Unclean!" They had to perform this strange ritual of yelling out in order to protect others from coming too close and getting infected. As long as one was infected he remained unclean. He must live outside the camp, both Jews and Samaritans together. Leprosy, like ethnicity, created boundaries. Yet, stranger things have drawn people together and those with leprosy had a commonality that drew them together in community.

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<sup>1</sup> Ortberg, John, *When the Game is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box*, Zondervan, 2007, pg 148.

When Jesus saw them, he instructed them to go see the priests. You see, the priests were not only the keepers of the house of worship but also the health officials and if a person was miraculously healed, it was up to the priest to inspect the body and pronounce them healed. And even though they weren't healed yet, the lepers demonstrated their faith by following Jesus' instruction. Only as they were on their way to see the priests, were they made clean. Jesus responded to their cries for mercy by drawing them into an act of faith that resulted in their physical healing.

So far the story itself is fairly typical. Jesus is traveling, people need healing, Jesus gives instructions, and they are healed. Where it gets interesting is when we notice the person who turned back to give thanks. Only the Samaritan (the outsider of the outsiders) returned to praise Jesus as the source of his healing. He literally "fell before his feet" to thank him and he wasn't shy about expressing it. He was loud! It says he praised him in a loud voice. Why was he so loud? Maybe it was because he had yelled from a distance for so long, he didn't know how to be quiet anymore. Or maybe it was because he was just so thankful!

So what do you suppose happened to the other nine? Imagine for a minute that you are one of the nine. Where would you have gone? It's not hard for me to imagine what I would have done. I would have run home to find my family to share my good news, hugging and kissing my husband, children, grandchildren, celebrating and making plans for the rest of my life, catching up on that physical touch that had been missing my life for so many years. Do you think you would you be one of the nine who went away or the one who came back to express gratitude? If I'm being honest, I'm afraid I might have been one of the nine.

Then Jesus said to the Samaritan, "Get up and go; your faith has made you well." But wait, wasn't the Samaritan already made well even before he came back praising God and giving thanks to Jesus? Hadn't Jesus just healed him along with the nine others? Greek word used here is "**sodzo**" which means to be healed, saved or delivered. The Greeks used it when people had escaped dangerous situations.

- Sailors surviving a storm at sea said they had been "So-dzo-ed."
- When Matthew began his gospel, he started with the Christmas story. The angel told Joseph to name the Christ child "Jesus," because that name meant that he would "save people from their sins." He would "so-dzo" the people.
- The Samaritan recognized he'd been "so-dzo"ed and returned to thank Jesus show his faithfulness to the mercy of God.

The Samaritan's thankfulness for his physical healing showed evidence of deeper, spiritual healing, which is true salvation. His gratitude delivered him, healed him (so-dzo-ed) him from the pain and brokenness in his life. Jesus said giving thanks to God, expressing gratitude, is the key to being made whole again. We were created to give thanks to God, to express our gratitude to other people and receive gratitude in return. Psalm 92:1-5 says, "It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night. For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord; I sing for joy at what your hands have done. How great are your works, Lord, how profound your thoughts!"

Because of Jesus, the boundary lines between who might be saved, leper or clean, Samaritan or Jew, no longer exists. The Samaritan's return allowed Jesus to demonstrate that no one, not a leper, nor a Samaritan, not me, not you, is beyond God's mercy. Anyone can experience God's salvation, shout with joy for it, praise God for it and walk along the same road Jesus travels.

So why then can it be so difficult for us to express gratitude? What is it that gets in **your** way of expressing gratitude? I posed this question on Facebook last week. Here are a couple of the responses that I received.

- If I really stop to be honest about it, the answer is always the same. It's when I'm comparing my circumstances to those of others or comparing my circumstances against my own expectations. It's a lot easier to be thankful when you bow a knee to the sovereign, loving God.

This from my friend who recently lost her husband to cancer:

- I have a very hard time with the idea that Thanksgiving is about ME. Now that circumstances in life have left me often alone, ME is almost my every other thought. My thoughts of gratitude are few and far between when ME is the center of my thinking.
- I wonder if for me it's that there's a certain humility and intimacy in gratitude that's difficult for me. Never really thought about it until you posed this question but as I read it and got an honest with myself that's what came to mind.

This one resonated with me because it stirred up something in me that I struggle with - allowing myself to be vulnerable. In order to be truly grateful, I think there's a degree of vulnerability and humility required. Think again about the man with leprosy who returned to express his gratitude. Literally translated, this man fell on his face and thanked Jesus. Can you remember the last time you fell on your face out of humility and gratitude for anything? I can't. But we all know people who exude gratitude, don't we? Why is it that some people are more thankful than others?

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk says, **"We're not grateful because we're happy. We're happy because we're grateful."** And to be more grateful we have to practice. Being thankful isn't just about having polite manners, being "Minnesota Nice", but it has to do with the condition of our souls and our relationship with God. We have to practice. Practice. Practice.

I recently heard this story about how a train of thought can influence a completely different outcome in almost any situation.

A pastor was visiting a hospital and as he approached the nurses' station he overheard two nurses talking. One said to the other, "OOO, I like your ring." To which the other one replied, "Thanks. My husband gave it to me. And I earned every bit of it." Here's how her train of thought might have worked.

She received the ring because she felt she earned it. Receiving the ring was a sign to her that her husband appreciated her. And if she was appreciated then the result was that she felt valued. But what if instead, when she received the ring, (and you can

replace the word ring with anything-forgiveness, love, compassion, food) she didn't think it was because she earned it but instead saw it as a gift, an unearned blessing. Let's call this grace, something that she did not deserve. And if she received a gift that she didn't deserve then she feels appreciated and thinks, "Wow. I'm loved so much." And this also results in a feeling of being valued.

So here's where those two different trains of thought lead. The first pathway says, "I worked hard for this. I deserve this. I do a lot of good stuff. I'm a good person. This world is full of gifts that people will give me. I'm entitled to it." But the second pathway says, "I'm getting blessings I don't deserve. In fact, there is nothing I could ever do to deserve this. I am loved. I am valued. I am thankful."

I think we all want to be more thankful, right? So how can we learn to be more thankful? Science says the reason we are not more thankful is because we're not more thankful. Let me say that again. We are not more thankful is because we're not more thankful. We have to practice being thankful. Gratitude can actually rewire our brains and kick starts the production of dopamine and serotonin. Like antidepressants, these "feel good" neurotransmitters activate the bliss center of our brains creating feelings of happiness and contentment. And this appears to be self-perpetuating. Research suggests that with regular practice we can retrain the frontal cortex to better appreciate and retain positive experiences and thoughts as well as deflect negative ones.

Dr. Amit Sood, Professor of Medicine at Mayo Clinic College of Medicine has written a book, "The Mayo Clinic Handbook for Happiness". In he says, "After years of studying and learning from patients, students, spiritual luminaries, scientists, and philosophers, gradually a theme emerged. I realized that human suffering is often not caused by our conscious thoughts and actions. A high proportion of our suffering originates in the automatic innate mechanisms of our brain that evolved to provide us survival advantage in the treacherous past. The brain and mind work very hard to keep us dissatisfied and stressed, effortlessly bypassing happiness. Our suffering is nobody's fault, yet we all can do something about it. My life's mission is to share this scientific and practical approach with as many as I can so we live a peaceful, content and happier life, and thereby make the world a better place for ourselves and our children."

Dr. Sood's research discovered that a daily gratitude practice can significantly increase our happiness. Counting our blessings each day has been proven to not only increase our happiness but can also improve our physical health by inducing better sleep, boosting our immunity and decreasing our risk of disease. And who doesn't want that?

But, we have to practice. It's like a muscle that we can strengthen over time. And as we practice giving thanks more frequently, and share that gratitude with others, we create a climate in which it is easier to be grateful and encourages those around us to do the same, making room for a fresh appreciation of God's renewing, saving grace. We find examples of this all throughout scripture. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says that we should "rejoice always, pray continually, and in all circumstances, give thanks." Notice Paul isn't saying we should be thankful FOR all circumstances. He is saying we should be thankful IN all circumstances.

After fighting for his life for three years, my dad, in his final hours, slipped into a coma. My three siblings, my mother, our oldest son and his wife had gathered at his bedside at the hospital in San Diego. I had the furthest to travel and therefore was the last to arrive.

The medical staff expected him to pass in the night. But in the wee small hours of the morning, the nurse on duty pulled my sister aside and asked, "What is he waiting for? He should have passed hours ago", to which my sister replied, "Well, my sister from Minnesota is on her way but he doesn't know that." The nurse responded, "Oh, he knows." I arrived at 2 in the afternoon and less than an hour later, my dad died with his family gathered at his bedside. Was I grateful FOR my dad's death? No. But was I able to eventually be grateful IN this situation? Yes. There was a profound privilege of being present with my family at his passing. Grateful in but not for my dad's passing.

How do we practice gratitude in all circumstances? I know some of you are facing some really big hills and deep valleys in your life that are challenging your faith. Let me share two of Dr. Sood's tips to encourage you to start.

- **Keep a gratitude journal.** Write in a gratitude journal every day. Jot down quick notes or make a list. They can be as simple as something funny one of your children did or a kind gesture from a stranger at the grocery store. Any positive thoughts or actions count, no matter how small.
- **Make a gratitude jar.** Keep an empty jar, scratch paper and a pen in an accessible place at home. Ask family members to write on a piece of paper one thing that they're grateful for every day and drop it in the jar. During dinner or leisure time, take a few of the notes out of the jar and enjoy reading one another's thoughts. For families with young children, you might consider a paper chain of gratitude. Write words of gratitude on a strip of paper that you connect to one another, forming a chain.

So, are you up for a 30-day challenge? 30 days from today will take you to Christmas Day. Wouldn't this be a great gift to give yourself? Starting today for the next 30 days, either keep a Gratefulness Journal or start a Gratitude Jar and each day, write down at least one thing for which you are grateful and start re-wiring the pathways of your brain to a more grateful life with God?

This Christmas season may you be grateful for all the gifts around you. Our relationship with God and each other as well as the simple fact that we're even alive and breathing are all gifts, undeserved blessings. God, the creator of the universe, craves a relationship with you and me. God will do anything for you, for me, for the leper, the immigrant, to have a relationship with each of us. All created by God to be loved by God.

**Grow, Pray, Study for Week of November 26, 2017 \*\***

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord, I want everything to be for your glory. I want my thoughts, my words, my song, my church, my community, my resources, my time, my life: all to be for you. Everything I have is yours. Increase my gratitude with your holy presence. Amen.

**Monday: November 27**

**Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18**

Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

**Observation:** Gratitude is a sentiment we'd all do well to cultivate, according to positive psychologists, mental health clinicians and researchers who seek to help everyone create more joy in life. Feeling thankful and expressing that thanks makes you happier and healthier. The God who created us seems, given what the apostle Paul wrote, to have anticipated this growing body of research by a few thousand years!

**Application:** How much do the positive qualities of life Paul listed in this passage (e.g. rejoicing, praying, being thankful) appeal to you? How can you nurture an inner appetite for the good? In what ways do you find that choosing to nurture anger or complaint (about yourself, others or life/God) reduces your appetite for the good things God offers?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I'm grateful you didn't call me to give thanks FOR every situation. Even giving thanks IN every situation is often a challenge. Keep growing that capacity in me. Amen.

## **Tuesday, November 28**

### **Scripture: Luke 17:11-19**

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

**Observations:** In Jesus' day, "leper" meant a person with one of a variety of visible skin diseases. People thought all lepers were highly contagious, so they feared and shunned them. Jesus healed a group of ten such men—rejected and outcast due to their visible skin diseases. We see how isolated these sufferers were. They raised their voices and called to Jesus while "keeping their distance from him." But of the ten, only one Samaritan came back to say, "thank you."

**Application:** When one healed man returned to give thanks, Jesus asked, "Where are the other nine?" The text didn't tell us. Use your imagination and your knowledge of human nature: where do you think they might have been? If you had been one of the ten, which do you think is more likely: that you'd have returned to express your gratitude, or gone about your business?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, you even cared about people everyone else avoided. Which means that no matter what my problems, you care about me, too. And for that I thank you deeply. Amen.

## **Wednesday, November 29**

### **Scripture: Mark 8:1-8; John 11:35-42**

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry,

they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.” His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?” “How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked. “Seven,” they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

**Observation:** The creator of the world, the ruler of the universe, chose to “become flesh” and live on earth as a human being (cf. John 1:14). Would you expect such a being to have the ultimate attitude of “entitlement,” to demand everything that was his by right? Well, we know Jesus didn’t do that. As he gave us a model of what it means to be fully human, the gospels showed that his healthy human life included giving thanks in many different settings.

**Application:** Do you think Jesus’ reasons for praying were different from your reasons for prayer? Why do you believe Jesus prayed at all, and didn’t just say, “I’m the son of God—I can handle this on my own”? If you had been one of the first disciples, what difference, if any, do you imagine you would have noticed in Jesus after he had been praying?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, at one point, praying, you said, “Thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me.” Help me share that confidence, and say “thank you” for it more often in my own prayers. Amen.

**Thursday, November 30**

**Scripture: Luke 8:4-8, 11-15**

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.”

When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who

receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

**Observation:** The image of growing seeds Jesus used to illustrate spiritual growth made sense, not only to people in the farming area around the Sea of Galilee where he told this story, but to any of us who've ever tried to garden or grow a lawn. Even good seed, Jesus said, can't grow strong in poor or untended soil. Living as God wishes us to live, we cultivate an open, "good soil" heart. When we do that, "concerns, riches, and pleasures of life" won't be able to crowd out the good fruit God is at work to bear in us.

**Application:** What wishes and concerns most often compete with God's kingdom to be the top priority in your life? What key choices have made your heart more open to God's work in cultivating a "good soil" spirit? What shifts in attitudes, actions and values would move you further in the direction of being "good soil" for God's Word to grow in?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I'm grateful that some days it's easy to sense your power guiding and growing me. Other days a dozen urgent things seem to try to choke you out of my life. Help me learn how to "weed" those days, to keep my faith life growing strong. Amen.

## **Friday, December 1**

### **Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-10**

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

**Observation:** Too often, the news (particularly financial news) is full of words like "worry," "uncertainty," and "fear." Yet the traveling preacher and craftsman (Acts 18:1-4) who wrote these verses had little money and no retirement plan (in a human sense, at least). His words about "being happy with what you already have" might make us think he'd read this research: "Gratitude turns your attention to what you do have instead of what you don't, Philip Watkins, an Eastern Washington University psychologist, suggests. People who recognize the blessings they have tend to think they'll get happiness from things like fulfilling relationships—which, research shows, are the real sources of satisfaction." \*

**Application:** How rich (or poor) are you, by the measure these verses suggest? If your "contentment quotient" is strong, how did it get that way? If your quotient is lower, ask God to help you raise it. Research suggests strongly that using a gratitude journal is one good way to do that. In a culture flooded with messages meant to make you want "more," how can you avoid both pride and shame related to your material "success"?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I admit—too often, I don't want to be happy with food and clothing. Help me blunt the constant thirst for "more," and learn the peace and gratitude that you offer me. Amen.

*\* From Lauren Aaronson, "Make a Gratitude Adjustment." Psychology Today, March 1, 2006, found at [www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200603/make-gratitude-adjustment](http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200603/make-gratitude-adjustment).*

## **Saturday, December 2**

### **Scripture: Psalm 92:1-5**

It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the ten-stringed lyre and the melody of the harp. For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord; I sing for joy at what your hands have done. How great are your works, Lord, how profound your thoughts!

**Observation:** This week, we've looked at some of the psychological research that is confirming what the psalmist wrote long ago: "It is good to give thanks to the LORD." Here's one more bit of research related to the gratitude journals: Take just a few minutes each day to jot down things that make you thankful, from the generosity of friends to the food on your table or the right to vote. List-keepers sleep better, exercise more and gain a general contentment that may counteract stress and contribute to overall health. "Counting your blessings each day has been shown to significantly increase your happiness and your physical health." \* The ultimate source of joy in Psalm 92 was God's loyal love and faithfulness, realities that are always with us if we just recognize them.

**Application:** In verse 2, the psalmist spoke of expressing gratitude to God in the morning and at nighttime. In what ways have you, or will you, build recognizing and expressing gratitude into your habit patterns, so that you don't always have to try to remember to do it? Spend some time today praying about choices you can make to incorporate gratitude more fully into your daily practices as a Christ follower.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you made me for praise and gratitude. When I'm tempted to grump my way through a day, remind me of your ever-present love and faithfulness—and help me to be grateful for them. Amen.

*\* From Amit Sood, "To Improve Your Health, Practice Gratitude", Mayo Clinic Healthy Lifestyle, November 29, 2016, found at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/improve-health-practice-gratitude/art-20270841>*

*\*\* This week's GPS is adapted from materials from Church of the Resurrection, a United Methodist Church.*