

Give Thanks!

Luke 17:11-19

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Blessed people,

As Christians, we understand the holiday of Thanksgiving differently from the way the rest of the world understands it. That consists in the basic distinction that we know the personage to whom we direct our thanks, while the secular attitude is more nonspecific and dispersed.

Is that enough? Is it enough to know that we know the one to whom we give thanks? I suspect it's easy for us to become comfortable in our knowledge that we know something that the secular world doesn't. But how often do we actually practice what we preach? Do we become like these nine Jews – who really should have known better, for they were actually the people of God – and forget to give true thanks? Whether this is true of you or not, it is beneficial for us to revisit what thanks actually means: practice makes perfect in this as well as in everything else. So **Give Thanks!**

I. God Has Answered Our Petitions

Why do we thank? It's our response for a gift having been given. In the case of the lepers, "one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back...and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks." In this text, the giving thanks is really the second prayer. It follows in order after the first prayer was answered. That first prayer: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Now, that prayer is fascinating. It begins with an address, calling Jesus by name, then referring to him as “Master,” a respectful appellative indicating that the petitioners wished to submit themselves to the one of whom they made their request. But then the prayer moves directly into the simplest petition of all: “Have mercy on us.” This simplest petition is found in every one of our worship services, even this one. Pick up your *Hymnaries* for a moment, and page ahead a little after where we are now, to page 124. The Vespers service closes with prayers, from page 124 to 127, and the first of those prayers is known as *The Kyrie*, or, in a fuller expression: *Kyrie Eleison*. Κύριε is Greek for “Lord.” Ἐλέησον is Greek for “have mercy,” or “show mercy,” or simply, “Mercy!” We pray it in each of our services because we always need God’s mercy. It is God’s mercy that permits us to live. It is God’s mercy that gives us salvation. Mercy is not given to a dear friend. Mercy is not given to a celebrity or dignitary. Mercy is given to an enemy, a criminal, a dying, pitiable creature. I’ve got news for you: you and I are by nature enemies of God, criminals against his Law, dying in sin, and pitiable in our wicked illness. By crying out, “Κύριε Ἐλέησον,” in every worship service, we are reminding ourselves of our pitiable condition, and focusing for all our salvation, for every single good thing, in fact, on our Lord, our Κύριε, our Master, Jesus.

It was easy for these lepers to carry this attitude. Their disease was painful, agonizing, causing their appendages to rot while still on their bodies, causing them to grow weak and lose feeling in arms and legs, causing them to be covered in pale sores. Because of how terrifying this disease was, society shunned those infected, and so these ten lepers were forcibly deprived of all human contact except that of one another. They

knew they needed help. There was nothing they could give in payment for any service, and to imagine that anyone would *want* to come close to them would be foolish. These men deserved no help, could earn no help, and could attract no help. The only course left to them was to cry out for mercy to one they had faith could help.

When you ask God for anything—be it “Forgive us our trespasses” or “Give us this day our daily bread”—what madness possesses you to imagine that you deserve to be given whatever you ask for? The fact is, you know you don’t deserve it. Instead, every request you make is a request made of God’s *mercy*, that he would give you what you ask because, in fact, you deserve the very opposite. Learn, therefore, this first type of prayer: whenever you make any petition, any request to God, imagine yourself a leper, the lowest of the low, a walking dead man who is a terror to everyone except others like you, groveling and wailing in pain to the only one who is capable of saving you, with faith that he hears, he can help, and he will help.

And he does. God has answered our prayers. He has given us his mercy: most fully and finally by sending his Son to live perfectly in our place (for we are so pitiful and criminal we could not keep his law), and then to die on the cross, taking the punishment we deserved. Granted, sometimes the answers given confuse us. His answer certainly confused these lepers. They no doubt had heard of his healing powers (and he had even healed lepers before; take this account from Matthew: “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched [the leper], saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed” [Matt. 8:3]). That’s what gave them the reason to ask for his mercy. They had heard that he could help. But instead of reaching out and touching

them, and channeling his divine power into their flesh to make it whole, “he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’” Imagine these men. It was indeed required for them to present themselves to the priests if they were to reenter society, but they could see when Jesus told them to go that they were still afflicted with the disease. He had obviously heard their initial prayer for mercy, but the answer he gave required these men to trust: the answer wasn’t what they expected, and it was highly mysterious. But in fact this answer was a double-blessing, for while it afforded the opportunity for their bodily healing, as we read, it even more greatly provided the opportunity to act on their faith (however little it may have been by this point), which was an exercise that causes the faith to grow, even as exercising your body causes its muscles to grow.

II. Our Faith Has Made Us Well

Now, jump to the end of this episode: Jesus said to the Samaritan leper, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” But he also said, “Were not ten cleansed?” Indeed, all ten were cleansed, but the only one who was “found to return and give praise to God” was “this foreigner.” If all ten were cleansed, and the Samaritan is told that the agent of his cleansing was his faith, then it must be true that all ten were cleansed by faith.

It’s true. All ten had faith in Jesus’ ability to heal them — for this reason they cried out, “Mercy!” They had faith that he would respond. And they had faith, too, that his command to show themselves to the priests, although it was strange to them, would bear results. And they acted on that faith: they went. Was it saving faith? Let’s not attempt to peer into the hearts of men — that is God’s prerogative. But rather

examine the deeds and words in the case of this Samaritan leper, over against the nine Jewish lepers.

Jesus praises this Samaritan's faith, but is not afforded the opportunity to comment on the faith of the Jewish lepers aside from disappointment that they did not give thanks. To some degree, their lack of thanks is understandable: after all, they still needed to see the priests if they were to reenter society. But rather than go and immediately receive the fullness of the gift he'd been given, this Samaritan first went out of his way to give thanks for the gift. This giving thanks did not mean that the Samaritan had faith where the Jews did not, but it meant that he was further exercising his faith, and being enabled to grow in his faith, where the Jews were in greater danger of falling away.

What kind of faith did the Samaritan have? Perhaps as yet it was not saving faith, perhaps he did not yet know that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God who was to bear on his shoulders the sin and guilt of the whole world, this Samaritan included. But he believed that Jesus could and would help him, and he cried to him for mercy. This was at least the stirrings of faith that would lead to eternal life. It was faith that connected this man to the saving power of Jesus — when Jesus told him, “your faith has made you well,” he was pointing it out to encourage this man to cling to that faith to the end, for only by means of faith can one be made *eternally* well, i.e. saved.

The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, part of the *Book of Concord*, speaks of faith in reference to another instance in which Jesus attributes faith with great power:

speaking to the woman forgiven of great sin, he told her, “Your faith has saved you”

(Luke 7:50). The Lutheran defenders confessed:

Now Christ did not want to say that by her works of love the woman had merited the forgiveness of sins. Therefore he clearly says, ‘Your faith has saved you.’ *But faith is that which grasps God’s free mercy because of God’s Word.* If anybody denies that this is faith, he utterly misunderstands the nature of faith. And the account here shows what he calls ‘love.’ The woman came, believing that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from Christ. This is the highest way of worshiping Christ. Nothing greater could she ascribe to him. By looking for the forgiveness of sins from him, she truly acknowledged him as the Messiah. Truly to believe means to think of Christ in this way, and in this way to worship and take hold of him.¹

Faith is the simple link that ties our hearts to the justifying power of Jesus. Faith is the extension cord that plugs us into the generator of Jesus’ merits. We can say that our faith has made us well, because it is by the road of faith that forgiveness reaches us.

The great error, therefore, would be to conclude that this Samaritan’s thanksgiving is equivalent to his faith. All ten had faith. The difference is that this Samaritan’s faith led him to further acting on that faith, in this case, giving thanks.

For a moment, examine that second prayer. The first, “Have mercy!” is an expression of our extreme lowness in comparison to the power of the one to whom we make petition. Giving thanks is an equally humble prayer. When a thing is given, it is natural to assume that something must be given in exchange. That is how our economy functions. In exchange for goods and services, we give money, which is good for other

¹ Ap IV:152-154, *The Book of Concord*, 97-285, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

goods and services. But if there is nothing that can be given — because the original giver refuses to receive anything, or because the receiver is so poor that he has nothing to give, what is given in return is thanks. To thank means to have good thoughts toward, to think of in high esteem. Thanks, then, in the broad sense, is the poor man's reimbursement for mercy.

Because this Samaritan was so low, so pitiful, all he could ask was mercy. Because he received that mercy, and had nothing to give, all he could give was thanks. His faith, which allowed him to receive the power of Christ granted by his mercy, led him also to give thanks. Giving thanks is the act of putting the giver into the forefront of the mind, acknowledging the gifts given. Interestingly, by giving thanks, faith itself is strengthened, because we recall past blessings and see how our faith has been rewarded. This encourages faith to continue, enables us to continue holding fast to God's mercy and grace by faith.

This Thanksgiving, use the opportunity to recall the blessings given by God, especially that greatest gift of our salvation through faith on account of the work and sacrifice of Jesus Christ his Son. Let that attitude of thanks, that great and humble prayer which follows the reception of mercy, fill your lives from here on out. We have nothing we can give to our God in exchange for the wonderful blessings he has given us. So give thanks.

Amen.