

## **Sermon – Offering Prayers of Thanks for Our Blessings**

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Christine Anders

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Imagine for a moment the life of a leper. When I lived in Africa there was a leper who used to sit outside the market I frequented. Half of his face and his hands had been eaten away by this terrible disease. He held a bowl between his forearms and would sit outside the market and beg. Almost everyone either ignored him or walked to the far door so they didn't have to look at him. I often wondered what his life as a social outcast must have been like. It was no different in Jesus' time, in fact it was worse. Lepers had to go about shouting "unclean, unclean" to warn others of their presence. Just like the man at the market, they were feared. If you developed leprosy you were sent to live on the outskirts of the village. If you came within 12' of others, they could stone you. You were untouchable.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus meets a group of 10 lepers. That isn't strange, people congregate. Lepers couldn't mix with others so they formed their own groups. In our story, the lepers saw Jesus pass by and cried out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest as only he could declare them disease free. On the way, they noticed their blotches were clearing up and they were indeed being healed. Just imagine how happy they were. They were now able to see their family that they hadn't seen in who knows how long. I imagine they ran to see their fields, their fishing boat, or their store. They had received a blessing from God. They were busy being well.

This is a good story but the story is not about healing. It is about what happens next. The story goes on to tell us that of the 10 who were healed, only one returned, fell at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Jesus asks, "Where are the other nine? Were not 10

healed? Only a Samaritan, a foreigner, returned to say thank you and offer a prayer for the blessing he had received. This story is about the response to the healing; how we respond to the moments of blessing in our lives.

I often wonder about the one who came back. I want to think he had a heart of thanksgiving even though he had developed leprosy. Maybe he said "My life is miserable. This leprosy is terrible. I wish I didn't have it but thank you God for being with me, thank you for giving me the strength to handle the situation, thank you for taking care of my family during this ordeal." I want to believe he knew he had been blessed and wanted to say thank you.

But what about the other nine? Maybe they were religious as long as they needed God. They had shouted for mercy but after they were healed, they no longer felt they needed God. They were busy being well. I can understand that. They had been separated from their families and friends and work and now they were free to return to those relationships. They were so busy being well they didn't have time to stop and offer a prayer to thank God for his blessing.

This week as we continue our series on prayer we are focusing on prayers of blessing. I wonder how often we don't stop to offer God a prayer of thanks for the blessings we have received. We are too busy being well. We often cry out to God during the pain of divorce, illness, bankruptcy or the loss of a job. "I need you Lord, my life is a mess." But too often after the crisis has passed and life gets back to normal, we don't feel the need to call out to God anymore. We are too busy being well.

When the other nine didn't return, Jesus was clearly angry. He wants us to show gratitude for our blessings. During these 12 weeks of our prayer journey, as we seek to be more intentional about prayer, let me ask you, when you pray are you just asking, "God give me this or that" or do you thank God for your blessings?

This is not a new story. For 40 years God looked after and helped his people as they wandered in the wilderness, providing manna, water and protection. Finally, he brought them to a land flowing with milk and honey. How did they repay the giver of the blessings? Not by having thankful hearts but by turning away from the one true God and worshipping the gods of Canaan.

It seems that it is part of our nature to always be big on requests and small on thanks for what we have received. The scripture says the lepers called out in a loud voice to ask for mercy but only one offered loud thanksgiving and praise. Isn't it sad that our prayers of thanksgiving are not as loud as our clamoring requests? How many times are we thankless? How often do we take God's generosity for granted? How many times has God answered our prayers, provided for our family, given us work, healed a sickness? How often have we said thank you? How often have we taken those blessings for granted, rejoicing in our good fortune but too busy being well to say thank you to the giver of those blessings?

As our relationship with God grows, we begin to live a life of gratitude. We are thankful because we know who has given us so much. We are thankful because we know what kind of God we have; he cares for us, provides for us, protects us. We have tasted the pleasures and joys of life because he loves us and has mercy on us. Even participating in this act of worship today is like the leper returning to Jesus. It is a way to say thank you to God.

But here's a problem. Many of us become used to God's blessings and we begin to take God for granted; we begin to expect blessings as our right. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the giftedness of life and other times we find ourselves consumed by concerns about fairness and a sense of entitlement. We expect blessings. We often fail to see God's hand in our lives. Sometimes we recognize blessings for what they are and other times we don't. But showing gratitude may be the purest measure of one's

character and spiritual condition. The absence of the ability to be grateful reveals self-centeredness or the attitude that I deserve more than I ever get, so I don't need to be grateful. The proper response to God's mercy is not presumption that it is something we deserve but rather gratitude and praise for what God has brought into our lives.

When we are at our best even simple daily occurrences can provide a moment of blessing: the laughter of a child, a sunset full of orange and yellow, safe transit through heavy traffic, an unexpected act of kindness, a pedal note on the organ that makes the windows rattle and our hearts stir. When we are at our worst, we are too busy being well and forget to thank God for our blessings.

There was a pastor by the name of Martin Rinkert. He was the pastor of a church in Prussia in the 1600s during the 30 Years War in Europe. From the year the war began until it ended, he was pastor in the same city. His was a walled town, so all the refugees from the war flocked to his city to find safety. The town was overrun by poverty, the plague and the perils of war. It was hell on earth. By the end of the 30 years, he was the only pastor left alive in town; all the other pastors had died so he alone was left to bury the dead, some 8,000 people including his wife. Somewhere in the midst of all that suffering, he wrote the hymn we sang at the opening of today's service. "Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices; who wondrous things hath done; in whom this world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms, has blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love and still is ours today." What an incredible sense of thanksgiving in that human heart. It is said that every morning he recited this prayer. "Thank you Lord that you chose to open my eyes this morning and give me the gift of life for one more day. May I remember this day that every breath I breathe has its origin in your grace. Thank you Lord that whatever this day holds, my time is in your hands to use me as you see fit. I have no plans of my own. May each moment be lived in praise and thanksgiving to your name. Amen.

We need to ask ourselves: are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay and for which we often forget to be grateful?

I have a challenge for you this week. Each day before you go to sleep, write down on a sheet of paper two blessings you received that day and then offer God a prayer of thanks.

You see, the greatest miracle doesn't occur when one is healed of leprosy, the greatest miracle occurs when the human heart is healed of ingratitude and we are not too busy being well to give God thanks. Amen.