

RETURNING THANKS
Sermon for Harvest Thanksgiving, 2021
Luke 17:11-19

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 17:11-19: **As Jesus was travelling to Jerusalem, He went along the border between Samaria and Galilee.** ¹² **As He was entering a village, ten men who were lepers came toward Him. They stood at a distance** ¹³ **and called out aloud, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”**

¹⁴ **When Jesus saw them, He told them, “Go! Show yourselves to the priests!”**

As they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ **When one of them saw that he had been healed, he came back, loudly glorifying God.** ¹⁶ **He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, thanking Him; and he was a Samaritan.**

¹⁷ **Jesus asked, “Were not the ten made clean? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one been found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?”**

¹⁹ **Then Jesus told him, “Get up and go! Your faith has saved you.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It is good that people acknowledge good gifts, as we are doing so today on this Harvest Thanksgiving Sunday. God feeds and cares for us, and this is what we pray for in the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, namely, “*Give us this day our daily bread.*” Luther explains that “*God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people.*” “*Even to all evil people*” just goes to show how much God takes care of mankind. If we were aware of how much God gives to us that we do not deserve, we would be moved to give thanks to Him. If we were aware of how much God withholds from us because He knows it will be bad for us, we would be moved to give thanks to Him. If we were aware of how God intends to use all things for the good of those who love Him, even those things that drive us to our knees and makes us afraid, we would be moved to give thanks to Him. There is so much to be grateful for to God, so much that no one could sufficiently thank Him enough.

In our text, we see a Samaritan leper giving thanks to Jesus. He and the other nine men were plagued by leprosy, a terrible disease. Leprosy is a chronic bacterial infection of the skin and superficial nerves in the skin. Having nerve damage results in a lack of ability to feel pain, leading to the loss of parts of a person’s extremities from repeated injuries or infection due to unnoticed wounds. Other wounds would fester and remain open and unhealed, prone to further infection. Leprosy was also painful, and since it was highly contagious, the lepers had to separate themselves from others, including their own families.

While this one leper was a Samaritan, we do not know the nationalities of the other nine. Perhaps they were Jews. Though Jews and Samaritans usually had no fellowship, misery loves company.

The Levitical Law had required that when lepers encountered other people, they were to cry out, “*Unclean, unclean!*” (Lev. 13:45) so as not to expose others. However, when these lepers saw Jesus coming, they did not yell out, “*Unclean.*” Instead, standing at a distance, they “**called out aloud, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”**”

To have mercy is to *get what you don’t deserve.* To plead for mercy is to acknowledge one’s sin and unworthiness. Mercy is the prayer of beggars, those who have nothing to give. Mercy is the prayer of sinners who recognise that they don’t deserve any gift or blessing from God.

So it was that the lepers called out for mercy. They didn’t try to convince Jesus to heal them. They didn’t make great promises of what they would do if they were healed. Instead, they pleaded for that which they did not deserve.

In His great love toward mankind, Jesus granted their request. “**He told them, “Go! Show yourselves to the priests!”** Still leprous, they obeyed Jesus’ words, and “**As they went, they were made clean.**” They were healed, no longer unclean but cleansed. When you have an open sore, how long does it take the wound to heal, especially if it’s infected? Days? Weeks? Months? But that wasn’t the case for these ten men. There was no more infection, no more

open sores, no more leprosy.

Before these men could return to their families, the priests had to declare them clean. Nine of the ten continued to go to the priests, but the one, the Samaritan, the one you would least expect, stopped walking and turned around. He again raised his voice, not to yell, “*Unclean,*” or to plead for mercy, but as he returned to Jesus, he was “**loudly glorifying God. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, thanking Him; and he was a Samaritan.**” The Samaritan leper had received healing, and so he returned thanks.

As you hear this account today, you may be thinking to yourself, “*I’m the one leper. I’m the one giving thanks.*” After all, you have come to worship today on harvest thanksgiving. However, we must realise that Jesus commends the Samaritan leper for *returning* thanks, for offering thanks *after* receiving the gift of healing. **Jesus asked, “Were not the ten made clean? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one been found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?”**

It’s one thing to be grateful when you’re hungry, and you’re sitting at the table, and the food is before you. It’s another thing to *return* thanks, to express gratitude when your belly is full and your needs are met. To return thanks when you’re full is what God had commanded the Israelites to do: “*You will eat all you want and bless the LORD, your God, for the good land that He has given to you*” (Deut. 8:10).

Based on this Scripture and others, God’s Old Testament people not only blessed the food before the meal but would return thanks after eating. The practice of returning thanks continued into the New Testament era. Thus, in the daily prayers of the Small Catechism, there are prayers for both asking a blessing *before* eating and returning thanks *after* the meal.

Unfortunately, returning thanks after meals is a practice that is falling into disuse. With our busy lives, it’s more difficult for families to eat together, and even when a family does enjoy a meal together, often the temptation is to eat and run, to grab your food and go, maybe offer a blessing before eating but not return thanks after eating.

The changing customs around mealtime lead us to reflect on our other attitudes and practices. We eat and run, not remembering to return thanks, but does this happen with God’s *other gifts*? Do we receive and run, not returning thanks to Him who is the giver of every good and perfect gift? With grateful hearts, we should remember to return thanks to the Lord. God gives daily bread. He gives us our families and our health. He provides all that we need for this body and life and so much more. We are full and satisfied because our God has blessed us beyond measure. We are full of God’s gifts and blessings, but are we thankful, full of thanksgiving, thankful to our gracious Father?

The reality is, we are often more like the nine lepers than the one leper. We receive and run, grab and go, rather than returning thanks. Our failure to return thanks is but one symptom of our greatest malady - the disease of sin. Leprosy manifested itself in sores over the body. Sin manifests itself in our ingratitude, complaining, and lack of contentment.

Now when Jesus encounters the lepers, they are cleansed. When they showed themselves to the priests, the priests would have to declare them clean. They were able to return to their families, their work, and their communities.

Jesus has also cleansed each one of us from our leprosy of sin. The Apostle John wrote, “*the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin*” (1 John 1:7). Jesus has suffered and died for our sins, both for the evil that we have done and also for the many times we have failed to do what we should do - including all the times we fail to give thanks. Through Jesus, we are cleansed and restored. Again John writes, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Through Christ’s cleansing, we are no longer separated from our Creator but reconciled and restored through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Even today, as we gather in the Lord’s house for the purpose of giving Him thanks, He is still all about giving and forgiving, cleansing and healing us. We gather to thank and praise God, and yet our God can’t help but bless and give and cleanse, for that is who He is and what He does.

As we gather for this Divine Service, His service to us, we learn how rightly to return thanks. In fact, the Lord’s Supper is called the Eucharist, which means “give thanks.” Before we partake, we do give thanks and pray before feasting at this table: “*Let us give thanks to the Lord. For that is fitting and right.*” We offer a prayer of thanksgiving and pray the Lord’s Prayer. Just as Jesus gave thanks in the Upper Room both over the bread and the wine, so we

give thanks for this bread and wine, this body and blood, that we are about to receive.

When we prepare to approach the Lord's Table, the prayer of the lepers becomes our own: "*O Christ, Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.*" Have mercy. Give us what we don't deserve. The lepers prayed, "**Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!**" and they were cleansed. We pray, "*Lamb of God, have mercy on us,*" and we are cleansed, cleansed by the blood of Jesus and by His body, given to us in this Eucharistic feast.

We also offer our thanks *after* we partake of this feast. Having received Christ's body and blood with grateful hearts, we return thanks to the Lord. We return thanks after our hungry hearts are satisfied. We don't receive this cleansing and just keep on walking like the nine lepers. We don't eat and run; we don't grab and go. Instead, we wait until all are finished, and then we return thanks: "*O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good. For His love endures for ever.*" "*We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this healing gift...*"

After the one leper returned to give thanks, Jesus sent him on his way with a blessing: "**Get up and go! Your faith has saved you.**" With grateful hearts, we receive the Benediction, the blessing of our Lord, and we go on our way, cleansed, restored, and forgiven.

In the Scriptures, we are instructed to "*give thanks in everything!*" (1 Thess. 5:18). In everything - when you're hungry and when you're full, when you're in need and when you're satisfied, giving thanks before, during, and after we receive the Lord's gifts of both body and soul. So it is that with grateful hearts, we "*give thanks to the LORD! For He is good. For His mercy endures for ever*" (Psalm 136:1). Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR HARVEST THANKSGIVING

God our Father, You have created the universe in great wisdom, and sustain it by Your powerful word. You are good to everyone, and have compassion on all that You have made. We enter Your house of prayer with thanksgiving, and come before You with songs of joy. We thank You for the many blessings and joys You lavish on our lives. We thank You for soil and seed, sunlight and rain, health and strength, machinery and technology, and every other blessing by which You give us our daily bread. You have given us a plentiful land, rich in resources for agriculture, mining, and industry. You have blessed us with education and skills to use these resources for the good of our country and its people. Although You do not always spare us from trouble and dark days, we still must confess that our cup of blessing is overflowing, and so we praise Your name. Make us continually aware of Your goodness, O Lord. Increase our trust that in all things You are working for our good.

But, Lord, You not only care for our bodies; Your richest love is reserved for the salvation of our souls. Because You have revealed Yourself to us in Your Word, we know You in Your limitless grace, and live in the light of Your truth and love. We thank You especially for Your greatest of gifts: Jesus Christ our Saviour, and for all the blessings of the Gospel and the Church. Help us to appreciate fully these choicest gifts, and to produce in our lives a rich harvest of faith, goodness, and love.

Free us from every temptation to trust in uncertain things like material wealth. Free us from covetousness, envy, and jealousy. Increase our joy in what You provide, and make us content. Make us more sensitive to what others need. Give us compassion to help those who have too little, and the opportunities to share Your blessings. Let our service to others pave the way for witness to the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ Your Son. Teach us to use wisely the things You place at our disposal.

Bless and strengthen the poor and the hungry, those who cannot work, the lonely, the depressed, and especially those who are suffering because of their Christian faith. Give them all the generous help of friends, but, above all, strong trust in Your presence and care.

Guide the nations on earth, and particularly those countries whose people are desperately poor. Grant that all who look up to You for material blessings may find Your kingdom, and Your righteousness. Bless our country Australia with a united spirit and godly goals. Teach its leaders and its people to know, believe, and do Your will. Remove from us things that are unwise and harmful.

Continue to supply the spiritual needs of our families, so that truth, love, and high morals may bless our homes.

We offer You our prayers and our songs of praise, heavenly Father, in the name of Your dear Son, our Saviour Jesus

Christ, to whom be glory and honour for ever. Amen.

HARVEST THANKSGIVING

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

¹ “When you enter the land that the LORD, your God, is giving you as an inheritance and you take possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first from all the produce of the ground, which you will harvest from your land, which the LORD, your God, is giving you! You shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD, your God, will choose to make His name dwell! ³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and tell him, ‘I declare today to the LORD, your God, that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us!’ ⁴ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD, your God! ⁵ You shall make this response before the LORD, your God: ‘My forefather was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with few people and lived as a foreigner there. There he became a great, powerful and numerous nation. ⁶ However, the Egyptians treated us harshly, oppressed us and imposed severe forced labour on us. ⁷ Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our forefathers, and the LORD heard our cry. He saw our misery, distress and oppression. ⁸ The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. ⁹ He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ So now, look! I have brought the first produce of the land, which You, O LORD, have given me.’ Then you shall set it down before the LORD, your God, and worship before the LORD, your God! ¹¹ Then you shall be glad about all the good things that the LORD, your God, has given to you and your family, together with the Levite and the foreigner who is living among you!

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶ In addition, I say this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each person should give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion! For God loves a cheerful giver.

⁸ God can make all grace abound toward you, that you may always have all that you need in every way and may abound in every good work, ⁹ as Scripture

has said: “He has distributed. He has given to the poor. His righteousness remains for ever.” ¹⁰ He who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed and will increase what your righteousness produces. ¹¹ You are being made rich in every way that you may be totally generous. This is producing thanksgiving to God through us. ¹² This work, which you are doing in serving others, not only supplies the needs of the believers but is also overflowing through many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ By this service, by which you prove yourselves, you are glorifying God for your subordinate confession of the Good News of Christ and for your generous contribution to them and to all people, ¹⁴ while they also long for you deeply and pray for you, because of the extreme kindness that God has shown you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone in the crowd asked Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!”

¹⁴ Jesus asked him, “Man, who appointed Me to be a judge or an arbitrator over you?”

¹⁵ Then He told them, “Beware and be on your guard against all greed! For a person’s life does not consist in how plentiful his possessions are.”

¹⁶ Then Jesus told them a parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, ‘What am I to do? For I have no place to store my produce.’”

¹⁸ “Then he said, ‘This is what I shall do: I shall pull down my barns and build bigger ones and shall store my grain and all my other goods in them. ¹⁹ Then I shall say to myself, “Soul, you have many good things stored up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and enjoy yourself!”’”

²⁰ “However, God said to him, ‘You fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get the things that you have prepared?’”

²¹ Jesus said, “So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”