

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Thankfulness

Presented by Graeme Best

Introduction

General George Patton once received a letter from a soldier who had been in the American Third Army. The letter was written following the soldier's completion of active service and was written to thank the General for his efforts, particularly for the care and concern that he had shown to this particular soldier.

The general responded to the letter and he wrote, "In 35 years of trying to do the best for my men, you are the first to ever write a letter of thanks."

Perhaps there are few points at which human nature is more lacking, than in the area of gratitude. We see it clearly in children. Parents must constantly say to children who have received a gift, 'Now what do you say?' So often we have to remind them to say 'thank you'.

As a high school science teacher, I organised many overnight excursions. We would enjoy a great time together; however upon our return it always surprised me as to how few children would ever make the effort to personally say thank you.

Saying thank you. It should be such a natural response for us. And yet, it is something with which most of us struggle, especially when it comes saying thank you to God.

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There is a well-known incident in the Bible found in Luke chapter 17 which highlights the fact that we humans have a problem in saying thank you.

As Jesus was leaving Galilee for the last time and was heading towards Jerusalem and the cross, he came across ten lepers outside a village – ten people suffering the terrible skin disease of leprosy. These lepers were a mixture of Jews and Samaritans, people at that time who would not normally live together. As someone once said, "What difference does your birth make if you are experiencing a living death?"

For these lepers were outcasts, living their lives separated from the rest of society. And they knew their place. That is why they did not rush up to Jesus in order to touch him as many others did. No, they stood at a distance, and called out, "*Jesus, master, have mercy on us.*"

In spite of their isolation from society, the lepers had obviously heard about Jesus and his great healing power and so they begged Jesus for help. Perhaps they saw Jesus as their last chance to be healed. And Jesus, showing his great compassion, responded to their cry for help. However his response was interesting because he didn't do what they or we might have expected him to do.

He simply told the lepers to go and show themselves to the priest – something lepers did after they were free of the disease.

We can use our imagination and picture them stopping and looking at their now cleansed skin ... and being overwhelmed with joy. Once again they could be part of their own community. Once again they could touch their children, their wives. It truly was an amazing miracle.

But it was at this point we see the outworking of the sin-stained human nature that we all have, because nine out of ten didn't think to go back and say thank you to the one who had healed them. Nine out of ten were ungrateful. It didn't occur to them that the first thing they should do was to say thank you to Jesus.

Only one returned to Jesus, overflowing with joy and praise and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. Only one had an attitude of gratitude. And scripture makes the point that the man was a Samaritan, someone who would not normally even speak with a Jew.

Now, it could have been expected that all ten would have run back to Jesus to thank him for the start of a new life. Surely they should have formed an impromptu men's chorus and began singing psalms and spiritual songs in praise to God. But no, only one said thank you.

And we immediately think, what an ungrateful lot. How selfish of those nine to be concerned only with themselves at that point. Yes, we can understand their excitement, their desire to get the all clear from the priest and get back to their families, but surely they should have taken those few moments to show their appreciation to Jesus.

But wait a minute ... before we judge these nine ungrateful men too harshly, what about ourselves? Consider how often do we ask God for something and then fail to thank the Lord when he answers? How often do we take our blessings for granted and fail to give praise where praise is due?

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Let's take a moment and consider some of our day to day blessings.

- The beauty of God's creation around us to enjoy.
- Our health ... and the health care available to us.
- Our families .. our friends.
- The jobs we have.
- Clean water to drink.
- Homes to live in. Warm beds.
- Good food to eat.
- Clothes to wear.
- Sports and leisure activities to enjoy.
- Television to watch.
- Phones to use.
- Watches to wear. ...

The list is endless. Now consider our spiritual blessings if we are Christians.

- The salvation that we have because Christ died for our sins.
- The sure and certain hope that we have of eternal life because Jesus had victory over death and rose again.
- The fact that we have a heavenly Father who loves us – who loves to bless us – who cares for us.
- The fact that we have, as Christians, the Holy Spirit living inside us, guiding, teaching, comforting, counselling ...

We have so many things for which to be grateful. Blessing upon blessing provided by a loving and caring God. But do you take time to give thanks? Do you take time to reflect on your blessings? On your answers to prayer? And thank God in return for his goodness? I must admit, I don't thank God anywhere near as much as I should ...

I pray for my family every morning. For their protection. Their safety. That God would go before them and help them in every situation. But I often forget at the end of the day to reflect on what God has done and to say thank you to God for answering my prayer. I just forget. To God, I must often appear like those nine

lepers. Ungrateful. Too interested in myself and my own situation to stop and say thank you. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians *“Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances.”*

Consider the circumstances of Martin Rinkhart. He became a minister in Germany in 1618, the year the Thirty Year War broke out in Germany. The whole of Germany was ravaged by war. Rinkhart pastored his church during the duration of the entire war. At times he presided over 40 funerals a day. He buried over 5,000 people.

The land was in ruin. Plague broke out. Shops were empty. He buried the two other ministers in his town and also his own wife. And yet, in spite of the appalling situation he found himself part of, whenever he could, he helped the people around him. He visited. He prayed with people. He nursed the sick, cheered people up. He kept people from despair. He inspired his flock, urging them to have fresh hope and trust in God. But he also found time to write some hymns in order that they might help encourage his people. And one of those hymns began with the words *“Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices.”*

It is quite incredible to think those words were written in the midst of such human misery. There was hope of peace when that hymn was written but there is no mention of the trials and difficulties they had been experiencing, only thankfulness and a quiet, joyful resting in God.

That hymn of course, is often sung in Germany at times of national thanksgiving. It’s a great hymn. But considering the circumstances in which it was written, it also reflects what should be the attitude of our hearts at all times. As Paul said, give thanks in all circumstances, for no matter what trouble comes our way, there is always much for which to thank God.

The Samaritan leper came back to Jesus and shouted “Glory to God!”, and fell at his feet to praise him and give thanks. His first response was to come to Jesus with his sacrifice of praise. You know, this pleased the Lord more than all the sacrifices the other men would have offered at the temple. You see, this man’s thanks was personal. It was from the heart, as it should be with us.

Psalm 116 says, *“How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call upon the name of the Lord.”* Instead of going to the priest, the Samaritan became a priest and built his altar at the feet of Jesus. And by coming to Jesus, the man received something far greater than physical healing: He was also saved from his sins for Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you.”

The Samaritan’s nine friends were declared clean by the priest, but this man was declared saved by the Son of God. While it is wonderful to experience the miracle of physical healing, it is much more wonderful to experience the miracle of spiritual healing, the miracle of eternal salvation. And so, we all should cultivate the grace of gratitude, for it not only glorifies and pleases our Father in heaven but also opens our heart to further blessings.

But we should ask, how do we give thanks to God? Well, obviously through our prayers ... in actually saying to God, thank you. And we should that, every day. It should be part of our daily devotion. Our daily routine. But is there anything else we should be doing? Can we do more than just say thank you to God?

Well of course we can. We can also give a gift to God, just as we often give thank you gifts to our friends. We can give back to God some of our material possessions. Our tithes and offerings. Let’s be generous in expressing our gratitude to God in this way. After all, he gave everything we have to us in the first place.

And we can also do things for God. We can serve him. Give of our time and talents in order that his kingdom is built up. It is a most appropriate way to say thank you to God. In many ways, it is easy to say thank you, but a whole lot harder to give of our resources and our time in thanksgiving to God. As someone once said, thanksgiving is good but “thanks-living” is better.

But .. something else needs to be said here ... for we also need to be warned this morning, because an ungrateful heart is a heart that is fertile for all kinds of sins, apart from the sin of ungratefulness itself. Romans 1:21 and following says,

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave him thanks and their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were hardened. They claimed to be wise but became like fools. And so God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator.”

Let us be warned. Being unthankful can so easily lead us into further sin. It leads us away from God. Thankfulness leads us towards God.

My prayer this morning is that you will move into this day, this week, with a firm resolve, perhaps a new resolve, never to let a day pass without reflecting on the blessings God has given you.

Let us always make thankfulness to God part of our daily devotion. Let's thank him for our blessings. Thank him for the answers to our prayers. And let's also thank him in practical ways, through our giving ... through our service .. and may both God and the world see our attitude of gratitude.

At the end of this year, many students will graduate from their studies. Giving thanks to God is a course from which we never graduate. One man returned to say thank you.

May your life and mine be lived as the one, and not as the nine.