

## **“Why We Take The Time” (Luke 17:11-19) Thanksgiving Eve, Nov. 26, 2008**

Johnny always loved it when Aunt Lucy came to visit. For good reason! She always brought him something special! And this time was no exception. The minute she walked in the door, she handed him a great big present. “Here, Johnny. This is for you.” Straightaway, Johnny ripped off the wrappings to see what was inside. Oh, man! It was the latest action figure he had just seen on TV! Just what he wanted! “So what do you say?” his mother asked. Johnny was too preoccupied to answer. “What do you say?” his mother prodded. Still no answer. Embarrassed, Aunt Lucy whispered, “He doesn’t need to say ‘thank you’ for my benefit.” But his mother stood her ground. “That’s very kind of you,” she said, “but Johnny does need to learn to say ‘thank you’ – for his own benefit.”

There’s a lot of truth in that, isn’t there? I mean about the need to learn to say “thank you.” It’s something everybody needs to learn. And not just because it’s good manners, though it is; not just because it makes others feel good, though it does. Really, for our own benefit we need to take time to say thanks, and the sooner we learn to do that, the better off we will be.

I say *“learn to do that,”* because it doesn’t always come naturally. Sometimes it does. Sometimes thankfulness wells up so strongly inside that we just have to express it. But that’s not always the case. Human nature being what it is, such feelings don’t well up nearly as often as they should. Partly, that’s because we don’t tend to focus on our blessings – more on that in a moment – but it’s also partly because other feelings can get in the way.

For instance, take the nine healed lepers in our text who didn’t come back to thank Jesus. What was up with them? They certainly had reason to thank Jesus. But they didn’t take the time. Why was that? Were they just too thoughtless? Or spiritually deficient? I doubt it. I’ll bet they simply hadn’t learned to take time to say thanks, so their other feelings got in the way. For the first, maybe getting healed was so overwhelming that all he could think about was heading home and seeing his loved ones again! Maybe he was too excited to take the time to say thanks. As for the second, maybe he was skeptical. You know, this kind of healing doesn’t happen every day. Maybe he wanted to make sure it was real before he took the time to say thanks. As for the third, maybe he was bitter. He had suffered a lot as a leper! And who knew what still lay ahead? After all he’d been through, maybe he felt this was too little, too late, and just didn’t feel like getting all “appreciative.” The fourth? Maybe a little too shy. He didn’t know what to say to Jesus, so he wound up saying nothing. The fifth? Maybe a little too proud. He figured it was *his* faith that saved him, so why would he take time to say thanks? The sixth? Maybe he didn’t want to feel obligated. The seventh? Maybe he just wanted to get on with his life. The eighth? None of the other guys were taking the time to say thanks, so why should he? And the ninth? Maybe he *meant* to go back to thank Jesus – but later; some other day. Right now, he was too busy to take the time.

Now, all of these are common emotions. All of these are understandable reactions. Still, they're pretty sad, aren't they? Not because *Jesus* needed these guys to say thanks. Rather, because they needed to. They would have benefited greatly from taking the time to say thanks.

*"But,"* some might object, *"if they didn't feel thankful, surely Jesus wouldn't want them to just fake it."* And that's true to a certain extent. Jesus wouldn't want them to just fake it, any more than He would want us to just fake it, but by the same token, that doesn't mean gratitude has to be a feeling to be real.

The truth is: gratitude isn't always a feeling. Sometimes it is simply an awareness, an appreciative awareness, of what is good and right and beautiful in our lives. The deeper this sinks in, the more likely we are to feel it, but we don't have to feel it for it to be real. Just recognize it. Just be appreciatively aware. And this is something we can learn. It's simply a matter of taking the time to look for the things that are good and right and beautiful in our lives, intentionally focus on them, and appreciate them for the blessings they are – blessings from God. We may not feel all warm and gushy about them. That's okay. There's a reason why we don't call it "thanks-feeling" but rather "thanksgiving." The main thing is looking for the blessings, recognizing them as blessings, appreciating them, and giving thanks to God. That is something anyone can learn to do. And it's well *worth* learning to do – for our own benefit!

Think of thanksgiving as a kind of reality check. By nature, we may be prone to zero in on what's wrong, what's missing, what's unfair in life, but are these things the full reality? No! In this life, there is always much more that is good, much more that is right, much more that is beautiful, and by consciously focusing on that "with an attitude of gratitude," we'll balance out our perspective; we'll see life more positively, more as it really is.

For example, think how prone we are to let specific problems overshadow everything else. Maybe we have family problems or medical problems. Maybe we have problems at work or financial problems. Far be it from me to minimize any of these things, but as bad as they may be, let's do a reality check and ask ourselves: are these problems all there is to life? No! Not by a long shot!

Some years ago, a good friend of mine was laid off by his company, and it was right after he and his wife had poured all their savings into a way-too-expensive new home. With two small kids, a huge mortgage, no nest egg, and no job offers, life seemed totally bleak. Totally. By his own admission, my friend was pretty depressing to be around. Finally, his wife had enough and basically told him: *Wake up and smell the coffee! Things aren't that bad! You're young, you're smart, you're healthy, you've got a great resume, and it's only been two months, for heaven's sake. Finding the right job takes time! If need be, we can sell this big house. We have family who can help us in a pinch. And we've got each other. You've got two great kids who adore you and a wife who loves you*

*enough to put up with you. Life is really pretty good – if you'd just bother to look a little closer!* He had to admit she was right. By focusing on the negatives, he had made his life much more miserable than it had to be, and soon enough things did turn around. This turned out to be a great lesson. Take time to look for blessings and recognizing them as blessings. Take time to appreciate what's good, what's right, what's beautiful, and give thanks to God. That can really balance out our perspective, and it is something anyone can learn to do. Something well *worth* learning to do – for our own benefit!

But you know, my friend wasn't the only one who learned a lesson here. So did his wife – from dealing with this “problem” person she was married to! Not exactly a unique challenge, was it? I suspect we all have “problem” people in our lives. And oh, can they cause us grief! Oh, can they make our lives miserable! Especially if we let them.

But here again, that's where it helps to do a reality check. Do *they* really make our lives so miserable, or does part of the problem lie with us – us focusing so much on their negative stuff that it overshadows everything else? I mean, even defining them as “*problem*” people” – doesn't that make things worse? When we're upset or dissatisfied with someone, it's so easy to vilify them – define them totally by what is negative about them, and of course, define ourselves as poor, mistreated martyrs. This doesn't make the situation better. At all!

But what if we did a reality check? Is there nothing more to this “problem” person than whatever it is that irritates us? Isn't there anything in this spouse, parent, or kid that we can value, that we can appreciate? I'll bet there is. And I'll tell you something. It's a lot easier to be patient with someone we value. It's a lot easier to put up with someone we appreciate. It may not change *them*, but it sure can change how we're affected by them. And how well we deal with them. In this case, my friend's wife didn't let her irritation rob her of her love. What she said to him came from a heart that truly valued and appreciated him. It made a world of difference – for her as well as for him. And this, too, is something anyone can learn to do. Something well *worth* learning to do – for our own benefit!

Looking back, I know this couple would also say they learned a profound spiritual lesson through this experience – a lesson about seeing blessings *as blessings*. Both of them had grown up in pretty affluent homes. Both of them had coasted through life with every possible advantage. For them, a “normal life” had always been a good life – a *very, very* good life – and they pretty much took the good life for granted; felt entitled to it. All of that was severely shaken when my friend was laid off. Spiritually, it shook them up, too. *What was wrong with God? Why was He letting this happen? It was so unfair!* But you know, to their credit they didn't just wallow in those feelings. They really struggled with them. And what they brought out of the struggle was a very different perspective. More like: *What has been wrong with us? Why have we felt so entitled to what we have? Why have we never appreciated our blessings as blessings? Why have we blamed God*

*instead of giving Him thanks? Really, that was so unfair!* And it was, but realizing it sure made a change in their attitude – and in the attitude they instilled in their children. They started cultivating an “attitude of gratitude.” They’d never claim to have it mastered, but even practiced imperfectly this attitude has made a difference. Taking time to look for blessings and recognizing them as blessings. Taking time to appreciate the good, the right, the beautiful, and give thanks to God. Cultivating this attitude has enriched their lives far beyond any material riches they possess. And this is something anyone can learn to do. Something well *worth* learning to do – for our own benefit!

Now, looking back to our text, I don’t know if any of this was what motivated the one healed leper who did take the time to thank Jesus. Maybe he just felt thankful and had to express it. But thankfulness can be more than that -- more than just a momentary feeling welling up inside. Carefully cultivated, it can become an attitude, a perspective, a new and better way of looking at whatever situation we are in. And the benefits? I’ve quoted these words of Melody Beattie before, and I think they are worth quoting again: *“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion into clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”*

My friends, that is why it’s worth learning to take the time to say thanks! Amen.