

Thank You Notes
Luke 17:11 – 19; Intro to Paul's Letters
Sunday, November 18, 2018

For the longest time, I absolutely *hated* writing thank you notes. I *really* didn't like to do it. You can ask Jen, after our wedding and baby showers, it was like pulling teeth getting me to sit down and help her write the thank you notes. And when she finally *did* get me to do it, I started getting sassy with it. I remember there was one person who gave us a trash can for a wedding gift. So I wrote, "Thank you for the trash can. We will think of you every time we use it." It's not that I wasn't *grateful*. It's just that, through some weird logic, I used to think, "They *know* that I'm grateful. They wouldn't have given us the gift if they didn't think we would *appreciate* it!"

Now, over time I have gotten a lot better about that, to the point that I actually really *like* writing thank you notes now, because I see it as an act of *love*. This is an opportunity for me to express to you, not just how much I liked this *gift* or this thing you *did* for me, but how much *you mean to me*.

Now, with that in mind, I want to take a look at Paul's letters. We have done this before, looking at how Paul begins every single letter he writes by saying, "Grace and peace," to the people he's writing to. But there is something *else* he says in almost every letter he writes, so I want to take a look at that.

When Paul writes to the Romans, he goes through his typical introduction, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ...to all God's beloved in Rome...grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ." But then the first thing he says after his introduction is, "I thank my God

through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.” He gives thanks to God for them.

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he goes through his introduction and then says, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus.” He gives thanks to God for them.

When Paul writes to the Ephesians, he says, “I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”

To the Philippians, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.”

To the Colossians, “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.”

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And then *again*, in his *second* letter to the Thessalonians, “We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.”

To Timothy, Paul writes, “I am grateful to God...when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.”

To Philemon, “When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.”

Almost every letter that Paul writes, he begins by letting the recipients know how grateful he is to God for them. He is not necessarily thanking them for anything they have *done* for him; he is expressing his gratitude for *who they are*. When was the last time you let someone know how grateful you are for *them*? What would our relationships look like if, in our conversations, our phone calls, our text messages, our emails, our notes and letters, we were intentional about saying, “I just want you to know how much you mean to me and how grateful I am to God for *you*.”

It’s so easy to get into that mindset of, “They *know*. They *know* how much they mean to me. They *know* how grateful I am for them.” We *assume* that they know how we feel, and so we don’t *say* anything. It’s so easy to take people for granted. And we do the same thing with *God*. God *provides* for us, we experience God’s *blessings* in our lives, and we assume that God *knows* how grateful we are, but we don’t find a way to *express* our gratitude and give *thanks* to God. Or we get so focused on all the *problems*, all the things that are *wrong* in our lives, that they are all we can see, and we forget to thank God for the *good things* that *are* in our lives that God has blessed us with.

We see that in this story of Jesus healing the ten lepers. This is such a simple story – almost *too* simple – that you look at it and think, “There has to be something *more* going on here.” Ten

lepers on the outskirts of town cry out to Jesus to have mercy on them. Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests, and as they go, they are made clean. Nine of the lepers – I mean, you can only imagine – they are *healed* of this disease that has forced them to be cast out of society, ostracized outside of town – they run off to go see their friends and families for the first time in who knows *how* long. One of them, it says, turns back and praises God with a loud voice, bows himself at Jesus’ feet, and *thanks* him. He has experienced God’s blessing, and he remembers to give thanks. The other nine have experienced the same blessing, but in their excitement to run off and reclaim their lives, they forget (or just neglect) to thank Jesus. Maybe they think, “He *knows* how grateful I am. I don’t need to *say* anything.”

Look how Jesus responds. This one leper bows himself at Jesus feet and thanks him, and the very next thing Jesus says is, “Were not *ten* made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” This is something that I can really relate to. Because for the longest time in my life, I could hear nine positive things, but if I heard one *negative* thing, *that* was what I focused on. I would dwell on it, and it would eat away at me and get me down so that I couldn’t even *see* the *positive* things that were there. I’m not alone in that, right? That’s something that can happen to *all* of us. And it kind of seems like that’s what’s happening with Jesus here. This one man – a Samaritan, from whom no thanks and nothing good was expected – thanks Jesus for this gift that he has received. But Jesus is focused on the ones who *didn’t* thank him. He’s focused on the *negative*, on what’s *lacking*, rather than what’s *there*.

How often are *we* so focused on the negative, on the *problems* in our lives, on what’s *lacking*, rather than what’s *there*, the *good things* that God has blessed us with? For me, writing thank you notes has become a kind of spiritual practice that helps me to focus on the *good* things in my life. And I kind of think that’s what was going on with *Paul*, too. Let’s remember that, most of

these letters that Paul is writing, he's writing them from prison, where he fully expects that he is going to be executed. And yet in the midst of *that*, he is able to say over and over again, "I am *so grateful to God for you*. There may be all this other bad stuff in my life, but *you* are God's blessing to me." Even to the Corinthians – the Corinthians are a church that has a *lot* of problems going on; there is a *reason* that Paul has to write a letter to *them* – in spite of all their problems, Paul is able to say to them, "I give thanks to my God always for you." In the midst of the *negative*, Paul *chooses* to see the *good*.

Jesus shifts his focus away from the nine who did *not* give thanks back to the one who *did*. It's all about shifting our focus.

We have started doing this thing every night when our kids go to bed. They say their prayers, and then we ask each of them, "What are you grateful for today?" Sometimes it's really easy for them. "I'm grateful that we got to have a yummy dinner." "I'm grateful that I got to play with my friends." But sometimes it's hard for them. Sometimes they get so focused on a *bad* thing that happened to them during the day that they can't see anything else. This happened the other night. I asked what they were grateful for, and one of them said, "Pretty much *nothing* today." I asked *why*, and they told me about these bad things that had happened. I said, "Yeah, that is hard. But even with all those bad things happening, there *must* have been at least one *good* thing that happened today. Even if it's really tiny." They said, "I got to eat lunch with my friends." So I said, "Yes! Let's celebrate *that* and give thanks to God for *that*!"

Paul is so deliberate and intentional about doing that. In fact, he tells the Philippians to do the same thing. The Philippians are experiencing conflict between some in their church (two women, Euodia and Syntyche), and Paul says to them, "Whatever is *true*, whatever is *honorable*,

whatever is *just*, whatever is *pure*, whatever is *pleasing*, whatever is *commendable*, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things*...and the God of peace will be with you.” Don’t focus on the *negative*. Focus on what is *worthy of praise*. That’s not to say that we should *ignore* the problems in the world and in our lives, the negative things going on around us, because if we *ignore* them, they will never *change*. But Paul is telling us not to focus our hearts and minds on them; not to become *consumed* with the negative so that that’s all we can see. Paul is saying, “Look for the *good*, the *positive*, the *blessings*. Focus your heart and mind on *that* and give *thanks*, and God will give you the peace you need to bring transformation to these *other* things.”

Henri Nouwen wrote a book about Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, and at one point he is writing about the older son (the one who *didn’t* leave home but stayed and worked hard and followed the rules) who was upset when he saw his father throwing a party for his younger brother who had been so reckless and wasteful. He’s standing outside, kicking sand, when his father comes out to find him and invites him to come in to the party. Nouwen identifies with this older son and says about him:

“I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to be grateful when I am criticized, even when my heart still responds in bitterness. I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty, even when my inner eye still looks for someone to accuse or something to call ugly. I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred.

“There is always the choice between resentment and gratitude because God has appeared in my darkness, urged me to come home, and declared in a voice filled with affection: ‘You are with Me always, and all I have is yours.’ Indeed, I can choose to dwell in the darkness in which I stand, point to those who are seemingly better off than I, lament about the many misfortunes that have plagued me in the past, and thereby wrap myself up in my resentment. But I don’t have to do this. There is the option to look into the eyes of the One who came out to search for me and see therein that all I am and all I have is pure gift calling for gratitude.”

Don’t take for granted that God or someone else in your life knows how you feel about them; how *grateful* you are for them. And don’t just focus on the *problems* in your life so that you lose sight of the blessings. *Look* for the blessings and *give thanks*.

In fact we’re going to do that now. In your bulletin there is a slip of paper. I want to invite you to write a thank you note to God. Think of something in your life for which you are grateful. And not just, “I’m thankful for my *family* or my *friends*.” Be *specific*. Which family member or friend are you grateful for and *why*? “I’m grateful for my spouse *because...*” “I’m grateful for my friend Bill *because...*” You’re grateful for your *job*? *Why*? You’re grateful for your church family? *Why*? Take a moment and write a thank you note to God. “Dear God, I am so grateful to you for...because...”

We’re going to share communion in just a moment. In scripture, the word that they used to talk about this meal was the Greek word *eucharist*. It literally means, “give thanks.” As Americans, we celebrate Thanksgiving on Thursday, but as citizens of the kingdom of God, *this* is our thanksgiving meal. And so when you come forward to share in this meal, I want to invite you to give your thanks. There is a cornucopia on the table filled with food that is supposed to

symbolize our gratitude to God for the harvest. Give thanks to God from the harvest of your own life. Fold your thank you note in half and place it in the cornucopia. Then share in this meal and be nourished by the goodness of God, so that your *life* might be a thank you note to God.