

What is Your Position on Gratitude?

[Luke 17:11-19](#)

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We live in a town where people are constantly asking each other about their positions on the issues. What about gratitude? What is your position on gratitude?

As Jesus entered a village somewhere on the border between Samaria and Galilee, he was approached by ten lepers. As the law required, they kept their distance from him. They were required to maintain at least ten feet of separation in order to protect others from being infected by the dreaded leprosy that would slowly eat away a human life. Typically leprosy began in a person's toes and fingertips, and then slowly spread its destruction until it reached the vital organs. It was a terrible way to die, and no one wanted to get near it. So from a distance these ten lepers cried out for mercy.

This is the first position on gratitude that we see in this text -- standing at a distance. Those who keep their distance are not grateful because they are removed from their dreams, and because they have been overwhelmed by something that is eating away at their spirits.

Isn't it fascinating that we know nothing about these ten lepers? We don't know their names, jobs, histories, or former place in the village. We don't know how successful they were before contracting leprosy. Were they rich or poor? We don't even know how many were men and how many were women. I can tell you this -- they weren't born lepers. In that crowd there was somebody's son or daughter, maybe somebody's mother or father, husband or wife. But all that has been lost. Now they are known only as ten lepers. It is as if the leprosy has taken over their identities. The disease forces us to remain at a distance, so we can't see who they really are.

Over the last few months many in our city have been infected by a leprosy of the human spirit called fear. Some are frightened to enter the government buildings where they work, or to enter an airplane for terror of a terrorist. Others are frightened to receive mail. Many are frightened of people who look different from the rest of us. So they keep their distance.

What if Jesus were to come to our village of Washington? Would that change all this fear? Well, by his Holy Spirit, he has been here a long time. I think frightened people know where to go to hear about Jesus. But once you've grown accustomed to keeping your distance, it is hard to approach even a Savior.

Many of the social commentators and talk show hosts have been asking how Thanksgiving is different for us after September 11. The best thing that most of them can say is that we should take life more seriously. Some have said we ought to reorder our priorities and spend more time with the people and things that are important to us. Before it is too late. That's good advice, but it is not nearly the hope the church has to offer.

We are claiming that it is time to rush toward the Savior, who is the embodiment of God in the flesh, the God who refused to stay at a distance from us. We are also claiming that when you know this Savior, life can be a whole lot more than gobbling up as many experiences as possible before someone takes it away from you. And we are claiming that you don't have to live with this cancerous fear slowly eating away your soul. Not when there is a Savior near by.

Seeing the lepers, Jesus told them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." The people would only do that to be declared healed, because only the priest could restore them to the community. Usually Jesus healed someone first, then told that person to go to the priest. But this time Jesus told them to start walking toward the priest as if they were healed. Why? I think it is because when people have been crippled by fear, the only antidote is to refuse to be a victim. So the Savior is telling them to take steps that move them toward healing. As they went, they discovered their skin was made clean.

When one of the ten saw that he was healed, he turned back to return to Jesus. This is the second position on gratitude -- turning back to Jesus the Savior. Apparently this is hard for nine out of ten of us. But to worship on Thanksgiving day is to turn our faces back to the Savior in the realization that he is the one who has given us every blessed gift we have. Our families, work, health, nation, every thing we hold dear has come from the Savior who refused to keep his distance from us. So we came here today, to turn back, and say thank you.

Remember that all ten were healed. They all got to keep their blessed healing, even though nine still kept their distance from Jesus. So ingratitude doesn't prevent us from receiving a blessing. Ingratitude prevents us from receiving Christ. This nation has clearly been blessed out of the mysterious sacred grace of God. If we refuse to acknowledge that blessing has come from him and if we just grab our blessings and run, that doesn't mean we will lose the blessings. The reason we are blessed is only because God is gracious. So don't dare assume that September 11 was a judgement against an ungrateful nature. We don't know that. To receive God's blessing and live without acknowledging it, doesn't necessarily mean God will remove his blessings. It means something much worse. It means we miss the Blessor, and do not know God.

Lest we pride ourselves too quickly upon being among the ten percent of spiritual elites who have turned back to Jesus to say thank you, let us stay with this recovering leper to find the third position on gratitude. When he got to Jesus, he threw himself on the ground at Jesus' feet. There it is. The third position some take -- lying prostrate at the feet of the Savior.

Many of us are willing to turn back to Jesus, but we want to shout our gratitude from a distance. This can be the essence of many our Thanksgiving prayers. "We know we have a lot of stuff, and we wanted to say thanks, over there. Really appreciate it." But that is not true worship. To truly worship is to throw yourself at Jesus' feet. From this position you can't see much. You can't see your blessings

or your fears. In fact, you can't see you at all, which is a blessing in itself. All you can see are the feet of Jesus, just the beginning of him.

To get to this third position of gratitude is to get to the place where you say with the Apostle, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Now you are worshiping Christ, not for his instrumental benefits to you, but simply because he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Now it is not about your needs, and it's not about your blessing. It is all about your relationship to the Savior.

Only those who make it to the feet of Jesus are really free. If you make your prayers simply about healing or blessings, you will still be fearful all the time. When those other nine used-to-be lepers saw a tiny white speck on their fingers, they must have freaked out in terror that the disease had come back. I can guarantee that even if the leprosy didn't return, something else certainly got them. They aren't still around.

Blessings are only loaned to you. Family, children, work, health, home, possessions, even life itself, will all have to be returned eventually. If you worry about when that is going to happen, your soul will be eaten away by the anxiety. You will never be free until you stop looking at the blessings you will lose and cling to the Savior you cannot lose. In fact, I would suggest leaving your blessings at the feet of the Savior. Give them up today and let him hold them for you. That way you don't have to worry about when you'll lose them.

Jesus told the man at his feet, "Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well." This is the fourth and final position on gratitude -- to go on your way as a person made well. Jesus isn't talking about the healing of body here. The man at his feet had already received that. I think that he is talking about the deeper healing of spirit. You will never be able to get on your way in life apart from your faith in Jesus Christ. This is faith not that Jesus will make your dreams happen, but faith in Jesus no matter what happens.

When your gratitude is not just in the blessings but in the Blessor, then you are free to live without hurt or fear of hurt. And then you are free to get on with the grace of life. Jesus doesn't ask you to stay at his feet. He wants you back on the road, but only as one who has the faith to travel lightly.

By your Holy Spirit, O God, help us make our way through all the positions on gratitude: to be thankful that you have removed the distance between us, to turn back to you in praise and thanksgiving, and to lose ourselves at your feet, only to hear your tender call to return on our way as a people who know how to walk in faith. Amen.