

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance¹³ and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice.¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:11-19)

Do these Trends Apply to Us?

There are certain trends that I find disturbing. For instance, no matter which party is in power, the national debt always seems to go up. If you divide the \$15 trillion dollar debt by the roughly 300 million Americans, it works out to about \$50,000 for every man, woman and child in this country today. So my family’s share would be a quarter of a million dollars. I find that to be a disturbing trend. But there are others. High school girls wearing bare mid drifts or boys wearing jeans that hang below their underwear are disturbing trends. It almost makes me glad the weather’s turned cold. Those lousy Green Bay Packers keep winning football games. It’s a disturbing trend that I hope is going to come to an end tomorrow. Most of us can think of trends that disturb us. But how many of them do we see in our own congregation? The word of God that we have before us this evening raises concerns about the way we Christians show our gratitude to God. **Do these trends apply to us?**

In our gospel lesson, Jesus stopped at a village on the border between Galilee, the extreme northern part of Israel and Samaria, that foreign area that divided the two Jewish regions from each other. When he came into this village, he encountered ten men who were suffering from leprosy. Actually, there’s some question about whether these men really had leprosy. The Greek and Hebrew words in the Bible that we’ve traditionally translated as “leprosy” seems to refer to a whole host of skin diseases, many of which were not as terrible as leprosy itself was. The word probably does refer to actual leprosy, which doctors today called Hansen’s disease. But it probably also referred to a lot of other conditions as well.

But under Jewish law, it didn’t really matter. Anyone with a skin disease was an outcast. Leviticus chapter 13 describes the kinds of diseases God was talking about and then it has a terrible command. People who had these diseases had to wear torn clothing and cover the lower part of their faces. They had to leave their homes and their families. Anytime an uninfected person came near them, they had to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” to warn those people to stay away. If you came down with one of these diseases, your life was ruined. So it’s easy to understand why these men came to Jesus. They wanted to go home. They wanted to work and go to church and be part of their society again. Jesus was the only person who could make that happen. So, they stood at a distance – because they couldn’t come too close – and they cried out, **“Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”**

And he did. He commanded them, **“Go, show yourselves to the priests.”** Leviticus chapter 14 commanded that if someone with one of these diseases were cured, they had to present themselves to the priest so that he could certify that they were healed and allow them to go home. So even though Jesus did not cure them on the spot, his command contained the promise that a cure was coming. The men went, just as Jesus told them to. On the way, the miracle happened. They realized that their horrible disease was gone. At that moment, one of the men ran back to Jesus praising God. He fell at Jesus’ feet and thanked his Lord for giving his life back to him.

But it’s exactly at this moment that the disturbing trend kicks in. Only one out of ten came back to thank the Lord. Now, I’m sure there were lots of reasons why the other nine didn’t come back. Jesus had told them to go and show themselves to the priests. The command in Leviticus 14 requires a full week of isolation by the priest to be certain that the cure is real. The sooner they got started the sooner they could go home. And without a doubt, going home is where their attention was focused. And you could probably think of half a

dozen other reasons why they hurried on their way. But Jesus asked, **“Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?”**

One out of ten came back to thank God. Do you think that ratio would be the same today? Do you think that more than one out of ten people stop and thank God for all the blessings he has given us? Sadly, I fear that the ratio might hold true for us today. And again, we'd have lots of reasons why. Our lives are so busy today. Most of us have two income families and that means that we're constantly juggling two jobs and school and all our kids' activities and on a weekend like this, we still have to clean the house and get things ready for company before we even begin to make our Thanksgiving dinner. Many of us may feel guilty about how little time we spend with our kids or our spouse or our parents. We may feel that's more important than showing up more regularly for church. We may feel we can do just as good a job thanking God by praying regularly at home. Certainly, we can pray and give thanks at home. But how many people who can't find the time to make it to church actually take time on a daily basis to thank God for all that he has done for us? We could think of one excuse after another. But in the end, is there any valid excuse for failing to thank God for all that he has done for us? I fear that one out of ten may be a disturbing and real trend for us today.

And there's another aspect to what happened that in some ways is even more disturbing: the only one who came back was a Samaritan. The Samaritans were the descendants of Jews and non-Jews that the king of Assyria had imported into the area seven hundred years earlier. They had a form of the Jewish religion, but it was very imperfect. They only had the five books of Moses and they had heavily edited and rewritten these books to support beliefs and practices that were different from what God had commanded Israel. They had doctrinal problems.

But when Jesus healed nine Jews and one Samaritan, the only person who came back to thank God was the Samaritan. Jesus himself called him a foreigner. The nine men who had grown up with the word of God, the nine men who should have had the clearest understanding of the truth did not do the natural thing of faith. But the man who had grown up with the sliced and diced version of the Old Testament religion understood the need to praise and thank his Lord.

Does this hit a nerve for us Lutherans? By the grace of God, no one has the gospel more clearly than we do. No other church's doctrine is more true to the Scriptures than the teachings God has given us. Most of us grew up hearing the gospel taught in its truth and purity. Could it ever be possible that Christians who have less correct teaching could be more willing to stop and thank God for the blessings they enjoy? Could it ever be true that Pentecostals and millennialists and Catholics would recognize all that God has done for them while we Lutherans take God's grace for granted?

I fear that could indeed be true. We're all sinners, and the devil would love for us to have a faith that just cruises along without thinking about God's grace. The moment we start to think about how much God has done for us and how little we deserve it, that's the moment we start to get grateful. That's the moment we start to think about changing our lives and sharing the good news with others and coming to church to hear more about it. So the devil wants us to be complacent. He wants us to focus on the evil and painful things in our lives instead of the blessings. He wants us to figure that because we have our doctrine straight, everything else must be OK. In other words, he doesn't want us to put any effort into living our faith or giving thanks to God.

Are we guilty of that sin? I can't answer that question for our church body or even for our congregation. I can only answer it for me. God has been so good to me. He's given me a wife and children. He's spared us so far from serious illnesses or disasters. He's blessed us with a home that keeps us dry and warm, with clothing that more than covers our bodies, with enough food that sometimes, we throw away what we can't eat. God has given my wife and me jobs that support our needs and even enable us to pay for our children's education. All those things are gifts of his grace. Do I stop and thank God for what he has given me?

God has done at least as much for you as he has done for me. Do we thank him enough? Or do we let the devil use all those other things to keep us so distracted that we forget to give thanks? Do we let the hard things in our lives keep us from seeing God's love and mercy? Do we figure we deserve the good things we get because we work hard and we pay attention to what's important and we're good people? The devil wins if we are guilty of that sin. I have to admit that I don't come close to showing the gratitude that God deserves for his love for me. Don't you have to admit the same? For that sin, we deserve nothing but death and hell.

But God's greatest gift is Jesus. God sent his only begotten Son into this world to save us from the sin of ingratitude. Jesus took on a real human nature. He was born and he lived like we have to in this world with

all its temptations and all its selfishness. Yet, Jesus always gave thanks to God. He did that for us. His thankfulness counts as our thankfulness. And Jesus went to the cross and he died because that's what sinners deserve. He suffered the hell that a whole world of ungrateful sinners has coming. He took your place and my place there and he paid all that we owe. Three days later, he rose. In that resurrection, God promised that our guilt is washed away. God promised that he sees no ingratitude in our hearts anymore. He sees only the love and thankfulness that Jesus lived every day. He promises that we are free from death and hell and all punishment. We are free and we will live with him forever.

There is nothing that can make us more grateful than hearing that message of Jesus' love and forgiveness. Because God loves us, he has given us that gospel and the faith to trust in Christ. Over and over again, he comes to us and loves us. He reminds us that we are his. He points us back to Jesus living and dying and rising and he reaches into our hearts and fills us with love and gratitude. Now he calls us to be the one in ten who give thanks to God. He calls us to pair a joyous and grateful attitude with the wonderful blessing of pure doctrine. He calls us to praise and thank our God because we have experienced Christ and his love. And because day after day, he showers more blessings on us than we can count or even recognize. All those blessings from God say, "I love you."

It's time for us to make a new trend in our church. And it begins with a new trend in our lives. Let us make this Thanksgiving about a trend toward gratitude to our Lord. Live that gratitude. Tomorrow when you gather with family and friends around a wonderful meal, give thanks to God for all that he has given you. Take the time, daily, to reflect on how much he has given you and how little you deserve it. Make your life a life of thankfulness, not just when you come to church, but in all that you do. May God fill you with his Holy Spirit and joy to live that life. Amen.