

"A DEBT OF GRATITUDE"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

There's an ancient legend about two angels who flew down to earth to gather up the prayers of the people. Wherever people bowed in prayer - by their bedside at night, in a chapel, or on the side of a mountain - the angels stopped and gathered the prayers into their baskets. Before long the basket carried by one of the angels grew heavy with the weight of what he had collected, while that of the other remained almost empty. Into the first were put the prayers of petition. "Please, Lord, give me this...give me that". Into the other basket went the "thank you" prayers.

"Your basket seems very light" said one angel to the other. "Yes" replied the one who was carrying the "thank you prayers"....

"People are usually ready enough to pray for what they want...but very few remember to thank God when He grants their requests."

### DEVELOPMENT

It seems to be part of human nature to forget to say "Thank you". Samuel Leibowitz, a brilliant criminal lawyer, saved 78 people from the electric chair and not one thanked him. Can you believe it? Art King had the radio program "Job Center of the Air". He found jobs for 2500 people, of whom, only ten ever thanked him. An official of the Post Office who was in charge of the Dead Letter Box in Washington once reported that he had received thousands of letters addressed to "Dear Santa" asking him to bring many things, but after Christmas, only one letter came to the box thanking Santa Claus for bringing the "asked for" toys.

There is something within the human spirit that resists the simple act of saying "thank you". Consider for a moment this event in the life of our Lord. Remember the time He was walking with His disciples along the border between Samaria and Galilee. They were entering a village when they came upon a band of lepers - ten in all - both Jews and Samaritans. It's amazing, isn't it, how mutual misery can cut across social, religious and racial lines. When you're hurting, like these lepers were hurting, you can't afford those silly prejudices that afflict the rest of humanity. Somehow when these lepers saw Jesus they knew right away that He could help them.

Charles G. Finney was a lawyer of great intellect and scholarship who became an evangelist. They say that after his conversion he made a greater impact on America than anyone else of his time. He had no entourage, no press corps, no PR advance team, no Sound System, no TV hook-up. Yet, under his preaching some 30,000 people weekly professed their faith in Christ at one point of his amazing ministry.

His most vigorous detractors begrudgingly admitted that he had an air of authority about him that commanded attention and respect. They tell of the time when he walked into a textile mill upstate and before he was introduced, before he said a word, all eyes turned on him. Some even were asking him how to get right with God. And at the altar call following his talk there were thousands professing their faith in Christ. He had an "authority" that captured their attention.

And even more so, so, too, did Jesus. "Jesus, Master...have mercy upon us" cried out these lepers. And how could Jesus deny their request. This is why He had come. His Kingdom was not one of power and might but of loving service. Sometimes we tend to forget that...even in the Church.

Dr. Joe Harding tells a delightful story about a man who injured his thumb on the job. The foreman told him to go to the clinic. He stepped inside and saw an empty room with only a desk and two chairs. At the back of the room there were two doors, one marked "Illness" and the other marked "Injury". The man thought to himself, "I'm not sick....I've just hurt my thumb". And so he walked through the door that said "Injury". He found himself in a second room. It, too, was empty except for a desk and two chairs. Near the back of the room there were two doors, one marked, "Internal" and the other, "External". The man thought for a moment "It's my thumb that's hurt...not something inside."

And so he walked through the door marked "External" and found himself still in another room. This, too, was empty except for a desk and two chairs. Toward the back of the room there were two doors, one marked "Therapy" and one marked "Treatment". He thought to himself, "I don't need any counselling or therapy. What I really need is to have this thumb treated" and so he walked through the door marked "Treatment". He found himself still in a fourth room. It was empty, except for a desk and two chairs. Toward the back of this room there were two doors, one marked, "Major" and the other marked "Minor". He thought to himself, "This isn't a major illness, it's only my thumb" and so he walked through the door marked "Minor". He found himself outside of the clinic on the street. He slowly walked back to the building and returned to work. Later on the foreman saw him and asked, "Were they able to help you?" The man said, "Well....I'm not sure...bit I'll tell you one thing...that's the best organized outfit I have ever seen!"

Wow! That hurts. Organization is a wonderful thing. An effective church must be well-organized. But the best organized church in the world might as well be torn down if it is not truly helping people.

Remember this. Jesus' whole reason for being here was to reach out to people...to help them...to heal and to lift. To set them on the high road of life once again. And when Jesus said to these lepers, "Go show yourselves to a priest", they departed and made their way to the Temple priest. He was requiring of them an act of faith. They were to begin their pilgrimage to the Temple even before they were healed. Luke tells us that on their way they were healed. Can't you see them jumping and shouting and praising God? What a celebration they must have had...these men with decaying and disfigured bodies who suddenly discovered they had been made whole....delirious with joy.

A man who played the French horn in the Salvation Army band use to say,

"When I think of what the Lord has done for me,  
I could just blow this old horn out straight."

And that's how those ten lepers must have felt. And one of them did more than just blow the party horn. One of them went back to Jesus to say "thank you, Lord". He was a Samaritan. That was important to Luke, the Gentile writer. "Were not ten cleansed?" asked Jesus. "Where are the other nine?" "Was no one found to return and give thanks but this...this foreigner?" And He said to that grateful Samaritan, "Rise and go your way. Your faith has made you well!"

I think Jesus knew that these lepers were not completely healed until they had learned to say "thank you". No matter how stunning your physical appearance, no matter how impressive your intellectual credentials, no matter how complete your material success, you are still a moral and a spiritual "cripple" if you have not yet learned to whisper those words, "thank you".

A STATEMENT OF CHARACTER

Saying "thank you" is a statement, first of all, of our character.

Is there anything that makes us think less of a person than to bestow upon them a gift and never receive a simple "thank you". I know that ideally we ought to give and not expect anything in return. And yes, I know, brides and grooms, it takes a lot of time and energy to acknowledge all of those beautiful gifts. But saying "thank you" is one of those things in life that separate the sheep and the goats. Everyone may feel gratitude but to go to the trouble of expressing that gratitude is a sign of character. It says a lot about the kind of person you are.

Remember that beautiful motion picture of a few years ago entitled, "Song of Norway". It was about Edvard Grieg's struggle to succeed as a composer. He had a friend who assisted him during the years of struggle. Indeed, this friend poured his life into making this brilliant composer a success. Later this friend lay dying and he sent word to Edvard, "Come and see me". But Edvard was now a star. There were concerts and receptions and famous people to meet and Edvard never made it back to his friend's bedside. Edvard Grieg may have been a great composer, but as a man, his life was surely lacking.

I think that this is what disturbed Jesus. These nine men may have been jumping and shouting with bodies that were now whole and strong, but they still had leprosy of the heart. There was still decay and disfigurement within. Saying "thank you" is a statement, first of all, of our character.

A STATEMENT OF FAITH

Saying "thank you" is a statement, our faith.

It was St. Paul who advised us to give thanks in all circumstances. The ability to develop a spirit of gratitude regardless of our situation is a statement that we believe that God is at work in our universe and that all things work to the good for those who love Him. Such an attitude makes for joy and a peace that is beyond any earthly prize!

Some of you have probably read that popular best seller by Garrison Keillor, Lake Wobegon Days. It's a delightful portrayal of small town eccentricities. One of the more memorable characters is Brother Louie. Now Brother Louie was a member of the Brethren Church (And the Brethren, like the Lutherans, drove Fords in Lake Wobegon, but distinguished themselves by carrying steel "scripture plates" bolted to the tops of their license plates. The verses were written in tiny glass beads so they showed up well at night). Actually Brother Louie, it was said, exceeded all others in his vehicular piety.

His car (a Fairlane four-door) was a rolling display of Scripture truth, equipped not only with verses on the license plates, but also across the dashboard, both sun-

visors, the back of the front seat, all four arm rests, the rubber floor mats, the ashtray and glove compartment, and just in case you weren't paying attention, he had painted a verse across the bottom of the passenger side of the windshield, 'The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord' - for your edification as you gazed at the scenery.

Brother Louie kept a plastic bucket by his left leg, where he kept the Gospel tracts, rolled up and wrapped in bright cellophane, which he tossed out at mailboxes as he drove along. The cellophane was to protect the Word from rain and also to attract the eye.

And, finally, one year, he found a company in Indiana that advertised custom made musical horns. Louie's horn played the first eight notes of the Doxology. It sounded like a trumpet. He blew it at pedestrians, on-coming traffic while passing and sometimes just for his own pleasure. One occasion, vexed by fellow drivers, he gave in to wrath and leaned on the horn, only to hear, 'Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow'. It calmed him down right away. The horn cost Louie more than a hundred dollars, and when he traded in the Fairlane on a Galaxie, he took the horn along."

Isn't that delightful? Hearing a doxology calmed him down right away. A sense of gratitude will do that to you. To sing, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow" even when you are stuck in traffic is a statement of the most healthy mind and heart possible. Saying "Thank You" is a statement of character. It is also a statement of faith, and more importantly, it is a statement of grace.

#### A STATEMENT OF GRACE

Perhaps one of the barriers to saying "thank you" is our pride. We don't like to acknowledge our dependence on anybody - not even God. We like to think of ourselves as self-made men and women. We like to think that we've done it all ourselves and that there is no one to thank. How blind can you be?

Perhaps this is part of the reason that one sometimes senses an absence of joy in the church today. How can we thank God for our deliverance from "sin and death" (as Paul put it) when we are convinced that we are already pretty good people who deserve everything God has given us? Sometimes we don't see our sickness, so how can we thank our Physician. We're blind.

The Associated Press carried a story recently about a Seattle woman who had renewed her search for the US Army doctor who saved her life in a Nazi death camp 41 years ago. "I wish" said this 62 year old woman of Czechoslovakia "I wish I could talk to him...and thank him and tell him it's wonderful to see him again at last." She was liberated from a camp in Austria in May of 1945, and treated for malnutrition, not having eaten for two months. She remembers the kindness and respect the doctor showed by keeping her covered as he examined her.

She moved to Seattle in 1950. Twenty years ago, she failed to locate the doctor through the Department of Defense. But she has not given up hope. She still longs to be able to see him and say face to face. "Thank you for saving my life".

John Newton felt the same impulse when God rescued him from the guilt of his life as a slave trader.

You and I are nice, decent people. We are not slave traders. Still, if we could look deep into our heart of hearts, we would see a decay and a disfigurement as severe as that of the lepers. There is within each of us a spiritual leprosy that denies the love and charity of others, that degrades our dignity as children of God, that twists and distorts that which is good and wholesome and eternal. If we could see ourselves as God sees us in our incompleteness and imperfection, then we would cry out with joy that God of all creation accepts us and loves us and gave His Son in our behalf.

A STATEMENT OF WORSHIP

Saying "Thank you" is a statement of our character. It is a statement of our faith. It is a statement of grace. Finally, saying "Thank You" is also a statement of our worship. And that is why we are here today. This is what our hymns are about, our offering, our pledges for the coming year, our architecture. It is our humble way of saying "Thank You, Lord". That is why worship is not optional for the Christian. It is what being a Christian is all about. We come here to say "Thank you...for healing us, helping us, loving us, lifting us, watching over us". I suppose that scarcely one out of 10 Americans today will truly say "Thank You", but for those who do, it's a statement of character, of faith, of grace and of worship.

PRAYER

Resting today in the afterglow of Thanksgiving, we pause to say "thank you" to you, O Lord, our God. For all of the blessings that have touched and enriched our lives, we bless you. Help us never to take them for granted, nor to ever take You, our God, for granted. For that love that follows us, lifts us, helps us, that knows no end, we give our thanks. And for the gift of Your Son, Jesus, in whose name we now pray. Amen.

CLOSING

I close with this line spoken centuries ago by Meister Eckhardt, and still true:

"If the only prayer you say in your life is THANK YOU...that will suffice".