



## Respectable Sins: Unthankfulness

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St. Luke tells us that as Jesus was making his final trip to Jerusalem – the trip that eventually led him to his crucifixion – he travelled along the road following the Samaritan-Galilean border. He was on the fringe of Judea. And as he walked into one of the villages along that road he was stopped by a group of ten men. They stood at a distance from him, calling out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

The reason they didn’t just approach him directly on the road, but had to get his attention from a distance was because they were all lepers. Lepers were biblically mandated outcasts in Israelite society. We don’t necessarily know exactly what the Bible means when it talks about leprosy – it probably isn’t the same thing we know as leprosy today, but we do know it covered contagious skin diseases. The Law that God gave to Moses and that’s recorded in Leviticus says, “The leprosy person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’” And so these men and women lived on the fringe of society. They lived outside the towns and cities – outside the town gate – in poor and makeshift conditions and they lived mostly off the charity others. If they were somehow healed or got better, they could only be let back into society by going and showing themselves to the priest. The Law explained to the priest what he was to look for, and once the leper met the qualifications for health, the priest would then pronounce him clean. And notice that these people weren’t just kept out of society, but outside the House of God as well. They weren’t just contagious. They were also ritually unclean, which meant they weren’t allowed to come into the presence of God. These people were cut off in every conceivable way.

And so they cautiously approached Jesus, staying at a distance, and calling out “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” These people had heard that Jesus was able to

heal the sick, and so they came to him in the hope that he might heal them too.

Jesus simply tells them, “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” As they went off in faith they were healed. And yet only *one* of them made the choice to turn around, go back to Jesus, and thank him. Interestingly the one that did go back wasn’t a Jew, but a Samaritan – one who was not only an outcast because of his leprosy, but also because of his race and his religion. Assuming the others were Jews, they were being both physically healed and also made ritually clean again. This man was ceremonially unclean no matter how healthy he was – he was a Samaritan.

I read that story and find myself thinking, “How is it that only one of those ten men came back to give thanks for their healing? And the one that did come back was the one with the least to be thankful for.” And yet I myself, and I think most of us as Christians, are guilty of doing exactly the same thing as those other nine men.

As I said last Sunday morning, we’re prone to thinking of great need in terms of the starving people we see on TV or the terminally ill people we know – people with physical sickness like those lepers. And yet our spiritual condition leaves us in even greater need. Humanity isn’t just sick – it’s spiritually dead. We’re slaves to the world, to the flesh, and to the devil. By our very nature we’re objects of God’s wrath and of eternal damnation. But in his great mercy and love, God has reached out to give us spiritual life. Through Jesus Christ’s death he has forgiven us our sins.

That Christ has given us spiritual life is a far greater miracle with infinitely greater benefits than the miracle those ten lepers received. And yet ask yourself, how often you give thanks to God for your salvation. Have you thanked God today that he has delivered you from the domain of darkness and transferred you into the kingdom of his Son? And if you did give thanks today, was it real and heartfelt thanks or just a nominal thing? This is yet another reason for which I’m so thankful for the Prayer Book as a devotional aide, in that it clearly directs our prayers away from ourselves to giving thanks to God for what he’s done for us.

You see, the whole of our lives needs to be given over to thanks and praise. We

need to heed God’s warning to the Israelites. In Deuteronomy 8 we read:

**“Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.”** (Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17-18)

It’s not that we don’t know that we should be giving God thanks for all he does for us. Our problem is that this knowledge in our heads doesn’t quite make it to our hearts. How often do we really give him thanks for our redemption? How often do we really give him thanks for dying in our place? And how often do we give him thanks for the “little” things in life? St. Paul, in speaking to the Athenians, reminded them that the very air we breathe is God given. How often do we give thanks for the skills, intelligence, training, and experience that God has given us to feed, clothe and shelter our families?

Too many of us take all these things for granted too much of the time. We gripe about the rust-bucket in the driveway, wishing we had a new car, and forget to give thanks to God for the rust-bucket that still get us to work on time. We gripe about the simple food we can afford on our budget, wishing for steak and ice cream every night, forgetting to give thanks for the bounty God has given, forgetting that there are many in the world who would be thankful for what we’ve got. We even take the redeeming death of Jesus Christ for granted much of the time. Hear me when I say, that failing to continually give God thanks has become one of our “acceptable sins.” We don’t even think of it as sin anymore. Yet St. Paul gives a description of the Spirit-filled life saying, we are to “[give] thanks

always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). Note the words *always* and *everything*. That means that our whole lives should be ones of continually giving thanks. It’s not just a nice thing to do – it’s the moral will of God. If we fail to give him the thanks we owe, we’re guilty of sin.

It might not seem like a big deal to us. We might think that it doesn’t really do anyone any real harm, but it’s an affront and an insult to the one who created and sustains us every second of our lives. Every Sunday morning we hear Jesus’ summary of the Law. If loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength is the first and greatest commandment, then failure to give him thanks as a habit of life is a clear and direct violation of the greatest commandment we have been given. Think about that.

We think it doesn’t really hurt anyone, but look at St. Paul’s description in Romans 1 of the downward moral spiral of pagan humanity. That downward spiral starts this way, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God *or give thanks to him*, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1:21). Again, think about that. Paul goes on to describe some pretty sick behaviour, but it starts with this failure to recognise what God has given and to give thanks to him. Their moral degradation was the result of God’s judgement on them as he gradually gave them over to more and more perverse forms of immorality. Not giving thanks is serious business. Is it any wonder that so many kids raised in Christians homes fall away as they get older. I’m convinced that one of the reasons is that we fail in this area of giving thanks. If our kids see us giving thanks to God *in* all things and *for* all things, it instils in them the same habit. But if we fall down here, we fail to communicate to our kids that all we have comes from God.

Now maybe your problem isn’t with giving thanks for all the good things God gives. But are you able to consistently give thanks in *all* circumstances? Thanking God for the good things is sometimes hard enough. But giving him thanks for what we see as the bad things sometimes seems impossible. Just a couple of days before we moved the

alternator in my car died. It wasn’t what I needed right then. I was dealing with enough things at the time. But when it happened, two things occurred to me: First, it happened at a time when the funds to make the repair were plentiful, and, second, I was sure glad that it happened when it did and not on moving day as we were coordinating an all-day trip across an international border, with two cars and a semi-truck and trailer.

I got in my car that morning and headed down the hill to work and suddenly the alternator light came on. My first thought was, “Oh great! This is the last thing I need right now!” But fairly quickly those other factors came to mind and by the time I was driving back up the hill and homeward, I was able to give thanks that it happened when it did.

Now don’t use my own example. I don’t want this to be purely theoretical. Think of your own situation – a predicament you found yourself in. Now ask again, “Are we to give thanks to God when the circumstances of life don’t turn out the way we hoped?” Yes! But this time I’ll give you a different reason. Earlier we looked at Ephesians 5:20, where the command was to give thanks to God for everything. I think that based on the context there, St. Paul is talking about developing a habit of continual thanksgiving for all the blessings of God – that’s one aspect of a Spirit-filled life: a thankful heart. But let me give you a different verse here. When we’re told we should give thanks even when things don’t go the way we’d like them to, think of 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

The context is different here. Paul is telling us to give thanks in *all* of our circumstances, even the ones we wouldn’t normally *feel* very thankful for. But even this needs some explanation. Having an alternator failure isn’t that big of a thing in the overall scheme of things. Think of some of the situations I described last week – big things in life: having a serious physical handicap or disease; being “stuck” in a low-paying or unfulfilling job; being in a difficult marriage; not being able to have the kids you want. Think of big things like that. And I think our response might be, “Okay, God, I’ll give you thanks, but only because I have

to.” And so by sheer willpower we give thanks to God through gritted teeth – kind of the same way we sometimes drop our tithe cheque in the offering plate. But that’s not how it’s supposed to work. Look at what should by now be a familiar passage: Romans 8:28-29 and 38-39:

**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Verse 28 says that all things work together for good, *for those who love God*. In other words, God *causes* all things to work together for good. St. Paul’s *not* saying that circumstances work themselves out for good, but that God directs their outcome for our good. But we also need to look at verse 29. We may think, “That’s great, but I don’t see things working out for what *I* think is good.” And that’s Paul’s point. It’s not that they’ll necessarily work out the way *we* want them to. It’s that God will work them out the way *he* wants – and what he wants is for us to be conformed to the image of his Son. That’s the “good”: for us to be more and more like Jesus. Paul’s telling us that God intends for all of our circumstances, both the good ones and the bad ones (and especially he’s noting in this context the bad ones), to be instruments of sanctification, of growing us more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

The best example I can give is one involving marriage. The marriage relationship itself has been designed by God to teach us about our relationship with the Father through the Son, Jesus Christ. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loves the Church, and the wife is to respect and obey her husband as the Church respects and obeys Christ. And not only that, but we’re called to be joined not for what we get out of it, but by what we give to another. If we see Christ as the

ultimate example of love, we see that love isn't about feelings – it's about giving, even when we see no return. And I can't think of any situation that teaches this better than married life. And an even better teach of this is a marriage to a difficult spouse. I've known many Christians over the years that have been through just such a "bad" situation with the end result that they came to appreciate what Christ had done for them and what true love is all about.

So when things don't go the way we want them to, we need to give thanks, not grudgingly, but truly thankfully. As I said last week, not resigning ourselves to the circumstance, but receiving it as God's gift, confident in the knowledge that it really is a good thing meant to bring us closer to him. We don't need to speculate about *how* God might use. Again, as I said last week, his ways are often mysterious and beyond our understanding. But by *faith* in the promise of God in Romans 8, we obey the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to give thanks in all circumstances.

After all, we have not only the command to give thanks, but we also have God's promise in verses 38 and 39 that nothing, including the situation we might find ourselves in, can separate us from the love of God. And again, this is another promise we have to cling to by faith. So we have dual assurance to enable us to give thanks in all our circumstances. First, by faith, we believe God is using or will use the particular difficult situation to conform us more to the image of Christ. And second, we have the assurance that even in the midst of the worst of difficulties we are enveloped by God's love.

In summary: we need to develop the habit of continually giving thanks to God. Above all else, we ought to be giving continual thanks for our salvation and for the opportunities he gives for growth and ministry. We should thank him for all our abundance of spiritual and material blessings that have come from his hand, but we also need to give him thanks when things don't go as we planned and when things get difficult. That's especially when we need to thank him for what he's doing through those circumstances to transform our character into the likeness of his Son.

I urge you, if you don't have them memorised already, to memorise these two important verses we've been looking at tonight: Ephesians 5:20 and 1 Thessalonians 5:18. When hard times come, they'll remind you to give thanks by faith in the promise of God. It's not a matter of willpower. If that's what we do, we're only giving thanks with our lips, but not with our hearts. If we cling to the promises of God, we can say, "Father, the circumstance I'm in now is hard and full of pain. It's not what I would have chosen, but in your love and wisdom you chose it for me. You intend it for my good, and so in faith I thank you for the good you are going to do in my life through it. Help me to genuinely believe this and be able to thank you from my heart. Amen."