

SPECIAL MESSAGES

WHAT’S MISSING IN YOUR LIFE?

Luke 17:11-19

Today and next week we will be looking at the topic of “Giving Thanks” – Thanksgiving themes for these messages as Thanksgiving Day approaches. Let’s open God’s word to Luke 17, verse 11 and following:

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

I want to ask you today: Is there something missing in your life? Do you sometimes find yourself thinking, “There must be more to life?” Well, in this account of the healing that’s recorded in Luke chapter 17, something is missing. Something really glaring is missing. Jesus heals ten lepers and only one returns. There are nine missing, and Jesus brings this question: “Where are the nine?” That which is missing in this account is disturbing, but it’s also revealing. It reveals something deep about human nature, about our failure to give thanks.

I want you to think about this for a moment. If I could promise you that today I’m going to give you something that’s going to fill in all the gaps of your life – that whatever is missing I can give you today -- that would be good, right? The challenge is that this thing which is missing – it’s a little shocking what it is. It’s the same thing that’s missing in this account. It is thanksgiving. It’s gratitude.

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That’s a big claim, and I don’t know that I would believe it with the conviction that I currently believe it if I hadn’t experienced it myself. But I do believe that I’ve experienced it to some degree. I’m growing in it, but I’m absolutely convinced of the truth, even though I have a long way to go.

Let’s just start with this very glaring observation, that the human condition is somewhat characterized by a lack of thanksgiving. The percentages here that Jesus faces are: 90% don’t come back and give thanks. 90% are inadequate in their expression of gratitude. Do you think that’s an accurate description of all of humanity? Or is that too positive?

I had the opportunity last week to go to a Thanksgiving service in another city, in another church. This church had a big dinner. It was really a neat event. Then they went into their sanctuary and passed the microphone around and gave thanks. Some people were thanking God and it was really moving. This one dear lady got up and as she was giving thanks she said, “You know, I just want to tell you I’m really lonely. It’s really hard to be lonely. I hate to be lonely. If you’re not lonely, you should be thankful.” I’m listening to her give thanks and I’m thinking, “I think she’s lonely, but I don’t know if she’s grateful.” I get it. She was hurting. The church received her. There was no judgment. I thought, “You know, it is tough for us to give thanks sometimes.”

I’m bringing this premise to you. I’m saying that this is the missing ingredient in your life. If you stop, you’re probably thinking, “No, no, no, no. I would be more grateful if the missing ingredient were there in my life. And my thanksgiving or lack of thanksgiving is somehow directly connected to something else that’s missing. But that, I don’t think, is a biblical perspective.

As we approach Thanksgiving Day, I think this passage has something really powerful to teach us. As I said, I experienced this in my own life almost one year ago to the day. A week short of one year ago, I was at a retreat. My wife and I were at a retreat for some pastors and wives here in the area, a small group. When the pastors were gathering, there was a man who shared that he had been away, alone with the Lord, and that the Lord had put on his heart two words. And God had powerfully met him in just these two simple words. It was one of those moments where God just dropped into my own heart, “Wow, there was such clarity in that and that I was to do that.”

We were staying at a resort here in the Fort Lauderdale area. We went back to our room and I began to journal. One of the words that I wrote was: “Grateful.” I wrote this to myself in the journal. I’m going to read it to you. It’s a little awkward, but it was self-talk, so allow me. I wrote: “Believe in my heart, Brian, and confess with my lips, and I will experience the multiplication and

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manifestation of the blessing and glory of God. Be a man and live gratefully.” This is the sense of what God was speaking to me. “Give thanks from the heart. Express it. Confess it. And you are going to see the blessing of God multiplied in your life.” God made a deposit in my heart on that day and on that night.

I have to confess, I’m not quite there yet, not that any of you thought I was there. But yesterday my wife and I decided to do some shopping. We are empty nesters now, so now we go shopping together. We have time and we do things together that we used to not be able to do. We went to the mall, then we went to a couple superstores. And evidently, most of you were there, because everyone was there. We couldn’t find a parking space. We went to Costco. I don’t know if you’ve ever been to Costco, but Costco is massive. You couldn’t even get around the parking lot. There were so many people and so many cars. We couldn’t find a parking space, so I dropped my wife off. She goes in, and I called her at one point, very sweetly, saying, “Why are we here on a Saturday?”

I kind of grumbled my way from the mall to this place to that place, and it evidently characterized my attitude for most of the day. My wife had no idea what I was preaching on today. At the end of the day, my dear, sweet wife says, “I just want to share an observation with you, that perhaps you could be a little more grateful.” I said, “Yes, Lord. I’m listening” -- the irony, on the eve before I bring this message.

I can relate to the personal struggle, but as God has been teaching me this lesson, as I am learning to grow in this lesson, I’m not talking about a superficial expression. Yes, I don’t want to grumble. I don’t want to complain. I want to verbally give thanks. But deep in my heart, I have found God increasing something really wonderful. I would have never ever imagined how faith rises out of a grateful heart.

Let me just see if I can explain to you how it works biblically and is illustrated in this passage. I want you to see three components: mercy, gratitude, and faith. If you will, just imagine a seesaw. Do you ever go to a playground and do the seesaw? What happens is, when we experience God’s mercy, then faith rises. Faith is increased or elevated. When we trust in the Lord and we exercise our faith, our experience of God’s mercy and goodness increases. You got that? Simple picture. As we trust in the Lord, we receive more mercy. As we receive mercy, we trust in the Lord.

But right in the middle, at this pivot point, is gratitude. It’s almost invisible. You look at the seesaw and see two seats; you don’t even think about the middle. But there’s this place where when we

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experience God’s mercy, we give thanks, and that ushers in greater trust in God. When we trust in the Lord, we, with a grateful heart, begin to experience God’s mercy.

It’s kind of like this. This pivot point is another way of trying to illustrate to you that thanksgiving elevates the whole experience. Without it, it’s just a piece of wood lying on the ground. Are you with me? Sometimes we have faith, and sometimes we experience mercy, but it’s kind of flat. There’s no momentum. A grateful heart has a way of generating momentum for us in life.

To give you some biblical support, I could go to many verses, but I’m going to give you three verses.

- Ephesians 5:20: “...giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”
- Colossians 3:17: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

What I want you to see here is that thanksgiving is the context for life. It’s our attitude. It’s the atmosphere. It supports the entire structure. It elevates everything up off the ground and is to characterize everything that we do.

Here is the vision I want to plant in your heart today. It has a way of magnifying and multiplying our experience of God. Sometimes God is really working in our lives, but we are killing the momentum because of a grumbling spirit, because of a complaining heart. Not me personally, but I’ve heard that it can happen. Let’s start with mercy.

I. Mercy.

Mercy is a missing element in our lives. In a way, you could say there are three things missing: mercy, gratitude, faith. I’m suggesting to you that this middle one is so prominent biblically, and yet we ignore it and ignore its significance.

Starting with mercy... Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is actually on his way to Jerusalem because he is going to offer his life as a sacrifice in Jerusalem so that he can show us mercy, so that we can experience the forgiveness of our sin and the healing of all that is not right in our own lives and in the world. When we are told about these miracles, the bible makes a point of using

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language -- Jesus himself makes a point of using language -- that teaches us something very important. It teaches us that the physical condition, the disease, the sickness is physical. It's real. It's painful. It's suffering, and we want to be compassionate, but it points to a spiritual condition. Jesus is wanting us to understand that our need is not just circumstantial, not just physical, not just environmental, but that we have a deeper need. We have a deep spiritual brokenness.

The language here in this case is that the lepers are unclean. That's a biblical concept. It goes back to the Old Testament. These 10 lepers are not able to go to the temple. They are not able to socialize. Others can't come near them because they are spiritually unclean. Jesus emphasizes that. He highlights it.

We would think, "Well, that's almost contrary to what we know Jesus to be." He is so compassionate. He is so loving. It seems almost like, "Why would you draw attention to that?" But he talks about them not just getting healed, but being cleansed. There is an invitation into a deeper healing, an invitation into a spiritual wholeness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. These lepers understand, "We need mercy." And they cry out to Jesus, "Show us mercy!"

We'll start right here with this observation: We all need the mercy of God. We may not all have leprosy, but spiritually we are all in need. That is taught us here in this passage and throughout the New Testament.

Now, here's the good news. When we say to God, "I need mercy; give me mercy," he loves to answer that prayer. He delights in it. In fact, just a few references: His throne is a throne of grace, according to the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 4:16 we are told to draw near. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need." God's throne is a throne of grace and there we receive mercy. God delights in showing us mercy. By mercy we draw near to God. Listen to these references:

- Isaiah 57:15: "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite." You see God is high and lifted up, exalted above everything, but part of the glory and majesty of God is seeing his desire to be with us in our brokenness.
- David, Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

- Psalm 34:18: “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”

If you are here today and you feel like, “I’m at my lowest point; I’m depleted; I have nothing; I have no righteousness to offer the Lord; I have nothing to commend myself,” you are in a prime spot to receive from God. God delights to draw us near when we are in a place where we are crushed in spirit and broken. In fact, in some ways you could say the Lord wants us to live in that place of a humble awareness and dependency where we just look to the Lord.

So, friends, is mercy missing in your life? Are you trying to relate to God in another way, a way other than mercy? Are you trying to relate to him based on your own merit or your own goodness? Are you trying to earn it with the Lord? Do you feel uncomfortable just coming to him and receiving his mercy and letting that be the foundation of your approach to him? One of the hardest things for us to do is just to say, “Okay, Lord, I’m going to relate to you based on what Christ has done for me, receiving your mercy, receiving what Jesus deserves, what I don’t deserve, rather than what I deserve.”

You see a beautiful indicator here of how our understanding of this does something wonderful in our lives. You have ten lepers; one of them is a Samaritan. Deep racial bigotry characterizes the Samaritans and the Jewish people. They don’t get along. They don’t associate. They don’t have anything to do with one another. But in their brokenness, they’ve got no one else, right? “It’s the ten of us.”

And when we understand our need for God’s mercy, it has a way of uniting us. The psalmist said, “Lord, you raised me up off of the dung heap.” There’s not a lot of opportunity for pride when you’ve come from the dung heap. “Yeah, but I was a little higher up.” The lack of unity and the deep divisiveness that characterizes us sometimes shows that mercy is missing in our lives. It’s a good place to be when God brings us. So, #1 – Mercy.

II. Thanksgiving.

This is that pivot point that I referenced earlier. This is what’s interesting. All ten receive mercy, but only one comes back to give thanks. The nine who don’t return show us a very important lesson. You can experience the mercy of God; you can be here today and sense God’s presence and sense the warmth of the love of God; you can even receive a tangible blessing of healing from the Lord and not be restored into relationship with him. That’s an important lesson.

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If you relate to God only in terms of what you’ll get from him, you may get help, you may get blessing, but you won’t get the ultimate blessing of salvation. That comes in our third point when we talk about faith. Only one of these ten comes back, and here’s what’s interesting. This is so helpful. He is praising God with a loud voice, and his praise is characterized as thanksgiving. That’s how Jesus identifies it. Do you know that you cannot worship God without a grateful heart? If you are not grateful, you cannot worship the Lord.

That doesn’t mean every moment is this Pollyanna kind of, “Whoo! Everything is great!” No. Sometimes we are lamenting and we are pouring out our hearts to God, but there is a fundamental atmosphere, a disposition of gratitude. “Where are the nine? Were not ten cleansed? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ And he said to him, ‘Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.’”

What happens is, he receives God’s mercy. His heart is full of thanksgiving. And what does that do? That turns his attention to the Lord. Now he is not focused just on the healing; he is focused on the Lord, and that brings him to a place of faith. That brings him to a place of receiving the ultimate gift of salvation.

Let’s look at it for a moment in the negative. You could almost say that greed is the opposite of gratefulness. What is it about us that we can want something so bad and for so long, we just have to have it. We long for it, right? And the second we get it, we move on. What’s next? We want the next thing. We show that our lives sometimes can be characterized by the opposite of gratefulness, which is greed.

That brings us to our third point, which is faith.

III. Faith.

This one Samaritan receives the mercy of God. He is called a foreigner. He is an outsider. What do you think the emphasis of that is? Anyone can receive the mercy of God. A leper who is a foreigner, the person who is ostracized -- he or she is a candidate. They come back with gratefulness. This moves this person to a position of faith and he is not only healed, but receives the gift of salvation. Notice that his faith is not in the physical healing, but it’s in his trust in the Lord. He moves beyond asking for mercy. He puts his trust completely in Jesus, and he is healed and made whole.

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You have faith, gratefulness, mercy, gratefulness...back and forth, moving as one encourages the other. Think about this for a moment. Let’s just say that you are here today and you long for your mate to be more attentive and to communicate more. There’s probably no one here who feels that way, but let’s just pretend for a moment. And let’s pretend that you’re the wife and it’s the husband who is not communicating. I know that’s hard to imagine, but just work with me for a moment, okay? Are you with me?

Then one day your husband comes home with a gift for you. He says, “Here, sit down on the couch. I brought some flowers and I also brought this little gift. I want you to open it. I want you to tell me all about your day.” He is looking right at you. He is not distracted. He doesn’t have his phone out. You have his full attention. So you tell him, but he says, “No, no, no, I want to know more. What are you thinking? Hey, what about this? What about that? You told me this. You were going to do this today.” You just have this amazing time. And when it’s all over, I’m going to give you two responses, two options.

- Option A: “You know, you need to do this more often. This has just been missing from our relationship. I basically live without this. Do you know how hard it is to live without this? You never really give me quality time. It’s about time!” That’s Option A.
- Option B: “Thank you. Wow. You can’t even imagine what a blessing this is to me.”

One option fuels momentum. One option gives rise to faith and an experience of greater mercy. Another option kills momentum and fuels unbelief. The reason faith and mercy are so critical in this generation of energy, in this movement of life, this rhythm of life, is because God wants us to have a vision to experience life not based on what we deserve, but based on his mercy.

The immediate thought you have, if you’re married, husband and wife, or parent and child, or friend to friend, is: “The minute I do this, the minute I start to thank God and to praise this person, they’ll quit trying.” You are thinking that, aren’t you? Aren’t you? We do that. “No, no, no. I’ve got to keep him or her in this place of having to try more.” But God invites us to a place of saying, “No, no, no. Let’s be grateful for the grace of God that we are experiencing, so that we can experience by faith more of God’s mercy that comes to us in Jesus.”

I want to close out this message and this is how I want to do it. I want to ask you to bow your head. I want to start by praying for individuals here who have never experienced the mercy of God. You’ve never put your faith in Jesus. You haven’t been relating to God personally. You don’t know

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what it is to know the forgiveness of sin. I'd like to pray for you. If that's you, I want to ask you to raise your hand. Just lift your hand up and say, "Brian, please pray for me. I want to experience the mercy of God. I want to receive not just help in the moment, but the greater gift of salvation that is alluded to and promised here in this passage." I'm going to give you a minute to respond. Raise it up so I can see you.

Lord, I pray for this person. I pray for those that are lifting a hand today, Lord, saying, "I want to receive this gift of salvation." This is a huge step in their lives. I pray, Lord, that right now as I'm praying, that they would pray a simple prayer to you of asking you for mercy, admitting sin and saying, "Lord, forgive me. I believe, Jesus, that you paid for my sin and I want to receive the gift of forgiveness. I want to receive the gift of salvation. And now, Lord, would you just fill me with your Spirit?" The Lord promises: Call on him and you'll be saved. God bless you.

This is going to conclude our service here, but before we do, you have an opportunity to respond to this simple message with a hearty yes and amen in your own walk with the Lord. If you have any conviction: "I have been negative. I have not been focusing on what God is doing, and I have allowed at times that complaining, negative attitude to characterize my life..."