



The Faith To Say Thanks

When I was growing up, my favorite thing about Thanksgiving was not the turkey but the apple pie. My grandmother made apple pie that in our estimation was the best in the known world. It was so good my brother and I were always trying to cajole her into making pies even when it wasn't Thanksgiving. When we hit our teenage years we thought we found the perfect method for keeping a continuous flow of apple pies headed in our direction. My parents had an old carpet they wanted to get rid of and it just happened to be the perfect size and color for grandma's house. Ordinarily, they would have just given it to her, but my brother and I decided this was an opportunity to make her our debtor. So we told her that she could have the carpet if she agreed to make twelve apple pies over the course of the next year. She was a widow by then and she had plenty of time and so she agreed. For the next few months we were in apple pie heaven. Realizing we had a very good thing going, we decided to conveniently lose count of the pies. My grandma was getting on in age so she never seemed able to keep track either. As the years went by it became kind of a joke, but grandma remained our apple pie debtor until the day she died in 1990.

It makes perfect human sense that when you've been given something, when someone has done you a favor like giving you a rug, you feel like you owe that person something; you want to make it up to them; you want to at least do something to even the score. It makes perfect human sense, but it makes no spiritual sense. In this passage in Luke, Jesus took great pains to show us that if we are depending on what we do to make ourselves right with God, we will never be able to do enough.

After all, if you really probed deep down into our hearts, what we really want is God's blessing in our lives. We want to know that God is well pleased with us. We want to know that there is nothing standing between him and us so that we can fully experience his presence and his power. But how do you get God's blessing when his standards are so high? How do you get off the performance treadmill of endless effort in trying to even the score with God?

I. God's standards are really high (17:1-6)

His standards are high, you know. Just to see how high they are, look at the opening verses of Luke 17. Jesus says to his disciples,

“And He said to His disciples, ‘It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble.’”

What's the standard? The standard is to cause no sin. A stumbling block is something that we do that causes someone else, particularly a young, fragile believer, to fall into sin. Jesus

says this will happen, but woe to the one who does it. It would be better that they drown Mafia-style than cause a little one to fall. That's a high standard. What parent can say he or she has done absolutely nothing to cause their child to fall?

But Jesus was just getting started. In v. 3 he says, **“Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”** Not only should you cause no sin, but you should love others enough to confront them in their sin. When you see someone going down the wrong path, a path that leads to pain and hurt, you should get involved; you should try to get him to turn around. And if he does, forgive him. That's a high standard. Our tendency is to want to mind our own business, not get involved, not appear judgmental.

But I will show you an even higher standard. Look at v. 4,

“‘And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying ‘I repent,’ forgive him.’”

Notice those words, “against you.” Here we have a person who sins against us seven times a day. Each time he turns around and says, “I'm sorry. I was wrong.” The first couple of times you can cut him a little slack, but after that you have serious questions about his sincerity. Jesus says, “Don't worry about that, keep forgiving him.”

Cause no sin. Get involved when others sin. Practice unlimited forgiveness. These are really high standards. The disciples knew that. And so it must have been in a semi-state of shock that in v. 5 they said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.” Basically, what they are saying is this: “If these really are the standards, if this is really what it takes to know your blessing and your power, you're going to have to help us out here.”

For the most part, they were right. Jesus agrees that faith is the key. In v. 6 he says,

“And the Lord said, ‘If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you.’”

They were right to identify faith as the key to being able to live such high standards. But they were wrong to focus on the amount of faith. They thought they needed more, but Jesus says even if they had less, that would be plenty. Even the smallest seed of faith is enough to uproot even a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea.

Well, suppose we experience that. Suppose we have faith, and suppose we've seen him do some pretty amazing things as a result. What then? So often we take our faith and the things God allows us to do through faith and we make it just another way to buy God off, just another way to make us feel like we've evened the score.

II. God is not moved by our service and sacrifice (17:7-10)

That's why Jesus went and told this parable in vv. 7-10,

“But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink’? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’””

Jesus tells about a man who had a slave working in the field. The slave has put in a full days' work and it's time to come into the house. Back then it was common for a slave to be responsible for both outside and inside work. So Jesus says when it's time to come in the master will not say, "Sit on down here. Pull up a chair and let's eat." Instead, he will say, "Make my dinner. Clean up and change your clothes so you can serve at my table. When I'm all done you can go and eat." And after the slave was all finished, the master doesn't thank him because the slave was just doing his job. Jesus concludes the story in v. 10 by applying it to his followers. He says, "Don't forget that you are just like those slaves. When you're done with all your good deeds and all your faithful service, you are just unworthy slaves doing your job."

I don't think the disciples liked that very much, but they knew it was true. In the ancient world, to sit at the master's table meant you had all the rights of the household; you were an equal with the master. We have a hard time understanding this because our culture is different. Let me try to modernize this parable. Imagine that you've been planning and saving for your anniversary for some time. You decide you're going to take your wife away to the Napa Valley. The big day comes and off you go. You arrive at the bed and breakfast, check in, get settled in your room, and get ready for dinner. You've made reservations at a nice place, very romantic. You drive to the restaurant and are seated in a great booth with a view of the vineyards. It's beautiful; everything you hoped for. The waiter takes your order and in a few minutes comes back with your salads. But you notice he has three salads. He gives you your salads but then pulls up a chair at the end of your booth and begins to eat his own salad. What would you do? You'd say, "What are you doing?" What if he said, "Well, I got you your meal, so now I'm going to eat my meal here with you." You'd say, "Now wait a minute. You're just my waiter. You're just doing your job. That doesn't give you the right to sit at my table."

Or what if you went back to your hotel and began to get ready for bed and you heard a knock at the door. You opened the door and the front desk person has her suitcase and she walks right into your room. You ask, "What are you doing?" She says, "Well, I checked you into this room. So I'm staying the night." You'd say, "No you're not! You were just doing your job. You don't have the right to my room. I'm not your debtor."

Through this parable, Jesus is saying to his followers, "Even when you have faith to uproot trees and when you have done everything I have told you to do, you still can't even the score with me. You can serve me well, but you can't make me your debtor so that I should thank you. You may even keep my high standards once in a while, but don't think for a minute you can earn your way into my household."

This is not a very complementary parable. I can just imagine the disciples thinking, "Wait one minute, Jesus! We have given up our careers. We've left our families. You're telling us that doesn't count? You're telling us that doesn't matter?"

I don't like to hear this either. I'd like to think my service counts. A few years ago someone in our church looked at me and said, "You know, if you had a real job you could have been rich." I thought to myself, "That's got to be worth something, Lord. Look at all I could have had if I weren't a pastor." But Jesus says God is not moved by our service and our sacrifice. He is not so indebted to us that He should be thanking us. I want to believe that because I have been good, God will be good to me and my family and my church. Many of you singles may want to believe that because you are being obedient to wait for God's best he is somehow obligated to bring you a wife or a husband. Or some of you parents believe that if you are careful to pray and read the Bible with your kids on a regular basis that God will see to it that they never rebel or wander from the faith. Or maybe you've been taught that if you just give a tenth of your income to God he will bless your bank account and you will never struggle financially.

We take our good works and we try to use those as bargaining chips before God. But God is saying that our works have no currency with him. God is saying he will be no man's debtor so that he should thank us. If we are trying to trophy our own goodness to get God's blessings, it won't work. It doesn't matter how good the apple pie is, or how many you make, it will never be enough.

If your children play youth sports, you probably don't have the space to set out all the trophies they've received. It hasn't always been that way. Now they give trophies out for participation. It doesn't matter if you were on the last place team or the first place team. It doesn't matter if you were the star or the bench warmer. Everyone gets a trophy. It used to be you only got a trophy if you were the MVP or if your team got first. I didn't get my first trophy until the sixth grade. I treasured it. I didn't get the next one until the eighth grade when my Pop Warner football team went 11-0. When I graduated from high school I had four trophies to my name. I was proud of my trophies. When I got married, my trophies moved in with us. I thought they should be prominently displayed. My wife and eventually my kids didn't agree. They weren't impressed with my trophies and today they collect dust in a cupboard full of junk I don't need.

The Bible says our very best works are nothing but filthy rags to God. Our trophies of service and good deeds have no currency with him. We won't be able to say to God on judgment day, "Look at my trophies God! Look at all I've done for you. Now let me pull up a chair and feast at your table. And by the way, God, you might want to say thanks." God is saying no matter how much good you do, it does not buy me off, it does not make me your debtor, it does not qualify you for my blessing.

When this truth really gets a hold of you, it can be scary. It can be scary because we've always been taught that's the way it works. If we don't have our good works, what do we have? If

God is not moved by the deeds that we do, what does move him?

III. God is moved when we come to him in desperation (17:11-14)

Starting in v. 11 Luke tells us that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He was traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered an unnamed village, ten men who suffered from leprosy stood at a distance and cried out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Why did they stand at a distance and cry out in a loud voice? Because in the ancient world leprosy was viewed as both a physical and spiritual disease. They were banned from the Temple and so were all those who touched them. So they had to leave the fellowship of God's community. They had to leave their homes. A dad or a mom could get leprosy and never again feel their child's arm around them. They couldn't even stay in town.

These ten men had heard about Jesus and with the combined confidence of the group they began to cry out in desperation, "Jesus, Master, have mercy (take pity) on us." What did Jesus do? He told them to go and show themselves to the priest. That was good news because it meant they were going to be healed. To enter back into society a recovered leper had to get the okay from a priest. Off they went, and as soon as they did were cleansed.

Don't miss this! Something moved Jesus! Jesus DID have pity on them. Why is that? Because Jesus (God) is not moved by the deeds we do. God is moved by the desperation of our hearts; the desperation that we own and bring to him. That's what moves him. That's what brings his blessing.

I heard a story about a couple with a teenage son who had turned away from the Lord and from his family. He was living a totally rebellious life. This went on and on to the point that his mother confided to a friend that she wasn't even sure she could love her son any more. There was so much hurt. After one of his escapades, the son came home as he had done so many times before. He claimed his actions weren't all that bad. He promised to make it up to them, to do better. But his mother had heard this so many times all she could do was walk out of the living room. The young man was left alone and he began to thumb through the family photo album that was on the coffee table. He came across a picture that moved him to brokenness. He called his mom back into the room and said, "Mom, when I looked at this picture I realized why you can't love me any more. In this picture you're looking at me as a little boy, and your eyes are filled with such hope for me. But Mom, I have crushed all your hopes. I know it." This time he spoke to his Mom out of his own desperation, not out of a promise to do better, or out of a protest that he wasn't that bad. When he realized in desperation that she didn't have any reason to love him, that he could never buy her off, then her heart melted and she could embrace him.

God says don't bother trophying your goodness or your service or your good intentions before me. He just wants us to be like these lepers who cried out for mercy. He wants us to come to him in desperation. It's not enough just to FEEL desperate. People do all kinds of crazy things when they are desperate. We can turn in so many wrong directions. But if in our desperation we come to him for mercy and grace, he will embrace us and he will heal us.

So we can come to him and pray, "Lord, this anger in my life, this ambition, this laziness, this lust, this jealousy. I see the leprosy in my own life. Have mercy on me." When we leave all

our trophies in the cupboard, better yet when we throw them out, and when we own our own desperation, he will begin to change us. It doesn't always happen instantaneously; it happens as we go, as it did with these lepers, but it happens.

So many of us live with a nagging consciousness of things we should be doing that we are not doing, or things we should not be doing that we are doing. We let these things hang around in our heads and we think that before we come to God we have to deal with them. Instead, we should let those very things drive us to him in desperation. Or we try to cover all those things up with good deeds or good intentions. We come to God thinking we're not all that bad. He walks out of the room and we wonder why we don't feel close to him anymore. It's because God saves his embrace not for the proud, but for the desperate.

IV. God is pleased when we're motivated by gratitude (Luke 17:15-19)

If that moves God, what should move us? The point of the story is not to just go and live a life of sinful desperation. He does change us. The leper was a changed man after being healed. What changes most of all is our motivation.

Look at the story again. As they are going to the Temple, they are healed. One of them sees that he was healed and puts on the brakes. The others continue on to get their ticket back into society, but one of them turns back to Jesus. Now it may not seem like it to us, but that couldn't have been an easy thing to do.

First of all, he was the only one. His nine friends continue on to the priest, but he turns back by himself. That couldn't have been easy. Most of us like a little company in the major decisions of our life. He didn't have any in this one. He was by himself. If I were him I would have been thinking, "Those nine guys are going to get their ticket back into society. They will be with their families in no time. They will be sitting around the table, laughing and eating. What if I miss out? What if somehow my leprosy comes back before I can get to the priest?" But he risked it and he turned back.

Not only that, he was a Samaritan. First Luke says in v. 16 that he was a Samaritan. And then in vv. 17, 18 Jesus calls him a "foreigner." Jews and Samaritans hated each other. The Jews viewed Samaritans as the low life of Palestine. They would walk an extra 50 miles just to avoid going through a Samaritan city. It's interesting that we are left with the impression that the other nine lepers were Jews. Perhaps they tolerated this Samaritan because misery loves company. But he knew what he was. And he knew Jesus would know what he was. If I were him, after seeing I was healed, I would have thought, "Man, I lucked out! It was only because I was hanging out with these Jews that this Jewish Rabbi healed me too. It's best if I just continue to lay low in this crowd of ten. If I go back, Jesus will see what I am and take it all back."

But this leper risked it all to go back. You see, he was motivated by something besides his own gain; he was motivated by gratitude. He had to turn back. It says he turned back, "glorifying God with a loud voice." Think of that. He had cried out to Jesus in a loud voice for healing. Now he praises Jesus in a loud voice. The degree of his desperation is now matched by the degree of his appreciation. And then

he falls on his face and gives thanks. He gives thanks because he knows that everything good about him, the Lord did. And this is what would motivate him and this is what should motivate us to not be a stumbling block, to get involved when we see someone going down the wrong path, and to offer unlimited forgiveness. NOT so an angry God won't get me, but because I'm so grateful for what he's given me.

A number of years ago when I was in seminary I was given an assignment to read a book. We wouldn't be tested on the book but we would have to sign a statement saying that we had read it in order to get full credit. If we didn't read all the book, it would effect our grade. Since I was working full time as a youth pastor I didn't have time to finish the book, but I signed the statement saying I did anyway. I rationalized that I would eventually finish the book, and that's what really mattered. Well, I never finished the book and a few years later, after I had graduated and moved on to another church I realized that I had lied and needed to deal with that. I found my professor's address and I wrote him a letter and told him what I had done. I was pretty scared. He could have easily stripped me of my degree. A few weeks later, he wrote me a letter, which I have in my hand, and I keep in my file as a memorial stone.

Dear Mark,

Thank you for your good letter! I value deeply your willingness to acknowledge your failure to list your reading accurately for the course. The pressure to satisfy course requirements can be a temptation!

But through this you have received grace to acknowledge this. Calvin said that true and lasting repentance follows our union with Christ through grace. I accept your confession as a sign of God's grace in your life - and you should too!

God bless you in your continued ministry and study - and read the book because you want to, not because you have to!

If he were with me when I finished reading that letter, I would have hugged him, and I think he would have hugged me. That's what the Christian life is about. We recognize our sin, we own it, we acknowledge it before God. Then with open arms we hear him say, "My grace is already at work in your life. You are mine." And then we become like the leper and throw our entire being at his feet, and say, "Lord, thank you. Anything that is right about me, you did. Lord, how can I serve you?"

In v. 19 Jesus said to the leper, "Stand up and go. Your faith has made you well." We read that and think, what faith? I mean, I don't see him confessing Christ as God or reciting some creed. All I see is him coming to Jesus and saying, "Everything that's right about me, you did."

We may think, "That's not much faith." But that's this much faith - a mustard seed of faith. Jesus said if you would have faith even as small as a mustard seed, you would see God's power and God's blessing. Your faith is your belief that everything that is right about you, Jesus did.

I want to thank Bryan Chapell and his sermon, "Thanksgiving and Faith," published by Preaching Today. Much of the insight into this passage was derived from Chapell's sermon, as was the line "Faith is your belief that everything right about you, Jesus did."

© 2001 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA