

November 22, 2015  
Thanksgiving 2015  
*Cultivating Gratitude*  
Luke 17:11-19

**Opening words:** How comfortable are you with your American history? Americans have been observing a national day of thanksgiving for a long time. Did you know, in 1783 George Washington declared a thanksgiving day because the Revolution was over? Did you know, in 1863 President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November 1863 as "a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father?" Each year afterward, for 75 years, the President formally proclaimed that Thanksgiving Day should be celebrated on the last Thursday of November. That all changed in 1939 - President Franklin D. Roosevelt set it one week earlier. Thanksgiving was observed on the fourth Thursday. He wanted to help the struggling economy by lengthening the shopping season. It wasn't until 1941 that Congress declared the fourth Thursday of November a national holiday, Thanksgiving!

Today's scripture lesson is traditional for Thanksgiving. It comes from the Gospel of Luke; we look at it annually; the story of the ten lepers. The story is not to be looked at like a mathematical formula; it is more like a general rule. Many people in our world are not thankful for their blessings. They are more concerned with what they don't have, than thankful for what they have. How many people do you know who are truly grateful? Do the people in your life consider you grateful? Our scripture reading is Luke 17:11-19. My message is called *Cultivating Gratitude*.

**Luke 17:11-19** Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup> As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance <sup>13</sup> and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" <sup>14</sup> When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. <sup>15</sup> One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. <sup>16</sup> He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? <sup>18</sup> Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" <sup>19</sup> Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

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This morning we find ourselves in the seventeenth chapter of Luke. The Master is traveling between the border of Samaria and Galilee. As he travels, he encounters various people. In that list of people are the ten lepers. You may know their story. Leprosy was a highly contagious skin disease caused by a certain bacteria. The disease still exists in our world today. In the United States approximately 100 cases are reported annually. However, today it is treatable. In the days of Jesus, it was not. In Jesus' day victims of leprosy were forced to live in isolation, away from family and friends, in leper colonies. This is the story of the ten men in the scripture lesson. They are living with leprosy without any hope of a cure. Then, they hear the news that gives

them hope, Jesus is coming! They have heard of his healing power and they run toward Jesus. However, they can't invade his personal space. They are mandated by law to keep their distance. The best they can do is yell at Jesus as he passes. This is the good news: Jesus not only heard their desperate voices, but he healed them. As was required by their law, Jesus instructs them to go to a priest for inspection. The priests had the authority to grant them permission to re-enter society. On that day ten men were healed. However, this is the sad truth: only one man returned to Jesus to say, "Thank you." The other nine never returned; the other nine just resumed their lives. They never said, "Thank you!" Never underestimate the power of gratitude. How many truly grateful people do you know?

History tells us the multimillionaire, Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) gave a distant relative a one million dollar gift. At the same time, he gave \$365 million to various public charities. The relative cursed Carnegie because he received such a small gift. How can anyone survive on a million dollars? That is like receiving \$17 million in our world today. Maybe that is the story of our time? God has given us so much, but we complain because we want more.

Today, I want to help you cultivate a grateful spirit. I want you to be like that one leper who came back to say, "Thank you." I am going to help you by asking you three questions. These questions are not original, they come from the Japanese self-reflective practice called Naikan. You will find a balance in these three questions. You will find yourself more grateful. So if you are ready to start developing your spirit of gratitude, say, "**Amen!**"

### **What have I received?**

Thanksgiving is rooted in hardship. Historians tell us the first recorded thanksgiving took place in Jamestown, Virginia. The winter of 1610 was harsh at Jamestown. Many settlers died. The group that once totaled 409 had been reduced to 60. Tradition tells us the survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how it might come. When help arrived, in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England, a prayer meeting was held to give thanks to God. There is no mention of a feast. Maybe that is why it is not the famous Thanksgiving?

The Thanksgiving we know took place eleven years later, 1621. Do you remember the story? The Pilgrims left Southampton, England in 1620. They wanted religious freedom. There was trouble from the start. As they sailed around the south tip of the British Isles one of the ships, the *Speedway*, was ruled not seaworthy. The two ships stopped and some of the Pilgrims went home. However, some of the *Speedway's* passengers boarded the second ship, the *Mayflower*. The ship was crowded. Maybe the extra weight cause the ship to sail slower. History tells us the trip took longer than the estimated 66 days. They had navigation problems too. They wanted to go to Virginia but they arrived in New England. It was November and the weather was growing harsh. There was no time to build permanent shelters, so they survived that first winter in this

new world in crude temporary housing. In time, disease came and the death toll began to rise. Only 51 of the original 102 saw the spring. The dead were buried in unmarked graves so the local natives would not know how small their numbers had grown. When spring came they were forced to make a painful choice. The Mayflower was a rented ship and had to return to England. Would they stay in America or return to England? They decided to stay and their luck began to change. Friendly Native Americans helped them plant 30 acres of wheat and build permanent shelters. By the fall of 1621, their homes were built and their crops were harvested. They decided to observe a day of thanksgiving to thank God for his blessings. Thanksgiving is rooted in hardship.

One of the perks of my job is being with you during life's most sacred moments. Sometimes, it is a wedding, birth or baptism. Sometimes, it is rooted in some of life's most challenging moments. I talk regularly about others' health and disease. I visit nursing homes and visit people who don't remember me. I hear about your broken relationships and your disappointments. I speak about death on a daily basis. You have got to be a little different to do this job. You would think that it wears me down, but the opposite happens. At the end of the day, I walk into my house and think to myself, "I have no problems". Your problems make my little problems disappear. I learned long ago, bad times make you appreciate the good times. That is what makes this Gospel story so perplexing.

This is question number one: what have I received? In the story, all ten received healing. You would think all would have come back to say, "Thank you" to Jesus. They didn't. How much have you received in your life? When was the last time you said, "Thank you!" If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

### **What have I given?**

How many of you know the name Henrietta "Hetty" Green (1834-1916)? She is a stockbroking legend. Nicknamed "the Witch of Wall Street", she wore a long flowing black dress. It was her only piece of clothing. When she died in 1916, her net worth was \$200,000,000. Today, that comes out to be about \$4 billion. She was so wealthy she bailed out New York City three times. However, in spite of all of her money, she hated buying anything. She left her apartment and lived in her office. People hated going to her office because she turned off the heat to save money. For a long period of time, she only ate cold oatmeal because heating it cost too much.

How many here know the name W. Clement Stone (1902-2002)? He was an American businessman and philanthropist. He once said, *"If you are really thankful, what do you do? You share."* That is exactly what he did. He gave away over \$275 million in his lifetime. He gave to civic groups, mental health groups, Christian organizations, the Boys Club of America and the National Music Camp. He once said, *"All I want to do is change the world."* Can I ask you a question? Are you more like "Hetty" Green, cheap-skate? Or are you more like W. Clement Stone, philanthropist?

This is question number two: what have you given? You don't have to give a million dollars away, but you have to give something away. It is all part of being in a community. It is all part of being a Christian. What are you going to give away to help someone else this Thanksgiving? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

### **What harm have I caused?**

There is a surplus of ugliness in our world this Thanksgiving. ISIS is alive and well. Every morning, I get up and turn on the news. It began over a week ago. Innocent people have been killed and maimed in Paris. The violence has been spreading around the world. Everyone wonders where the the next attack will happen; everyone is afraid it will come to America. Have you altered your life because of ISIS?

This is question number three: what harm have you caused? There is not a suicide bomber among us today, but we have all caused harm. The Bible tells us we are all sinners. We have all damaged some relationship in our lives. What harm have you caused? In each one of us are elements of the seven deadly sins. Do you remember them? 1. Pride, 2. Greed, 3. Lust, 4. Envy, 5. Gluttony, 6. Wrath, 7. Sloth

Which one of those seven do you relate to the most? What harm have you caused? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** How did you answer my three questions?

His name was Martin Rinkart (1586-1649). He was a Lutheran minister who lived most of his life in Eilenberg, Saxony. The hardest years of his ministry came during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The walled city of Eilenberg saw a steady stream of refugees pour through its gates. The Swedish army surrounded the city, and famine and plague were rampant. Eight hundred homes were destroyed, and the people began to perish. There was a tremendous strain on the pastors who had to conduct dozens of funerals daily. Finally, the pastors, too, succumbed, and Rinkart was the only one left—doing 50 funerals a day. Do the math. If you gave him a day off and he did not bury on Sundays, that is still 13,000 that year. When the Swedes demanded a huge ransom, Rinkart left the safety of the walls to plead for mercy. The Swedish commander, impressed by his faith and courage, lowered his demands. Soon afterward, the Thirty Years' War ended, and Rinkart wrote this hymn, *Now Thank We All Our God*.

Do you remember the words? This is the first verse:

*Now thank we all our God,  
with heart and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things has done,  
in whom this world rejoices;  
who from our mothers' arms  
has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love,  
and still is ours today.*

Now, if Martin Rinkart could write those words after surviving such hardship, then you can surely come up with something to be thankful for on this Thanksgiving. Orthodox rabbis teach, if you can't come up with one thing to be thankful for each day, then you are an ingrate. I think they are correct. God has been so good to us. When was the last time you thanked God for what he has done for you?

Will you pray with me?