

## DEBT OF GRATITUDE

There is an ancient legend about two angels who flew to earth to gather people's prayers. Wherever people bowed in prayer by their bed 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, but that of the other remained almost empty. Into the first were put prayers of petition. "Please give me this... Please I want that." Into the other went the "Thank you" prayers. "Your basket seems very light," said one angel to the other. "Yes," replied the one carrying the Thank yous. "People are usually ready enough to pray for what they want, but very few remember to thank God when he grants their requests."

It seems to be human nature to forget to say, "Thank you." Samuel Leibowitz, a brilliant criminal lawyer, saved 78 people from the electric chair; not one thanked him. Art King had the radio program, "Job Center of the Air." He supposedly found jobs for 2500 people, of whom, only ten ever thanked him. An official of the post office, in charge of the Dead Letter Box in Washington, D.C. reported, one year, that he had received hundreds of thousands of letters addressed to "Santa Claus" asking him to bring many things, but after Christmas, only one letter came to the box thanking Santa Claus for bringing the toys asked for.

There's something within the human spirit that resists the simple act of saying, "Thank you." Consider for a moment this event in the life of Jesus. 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 is amazing, isn't it, how mutual misery can cut across social, religious and racial lines? When you are hurting, like these lepers were hurting, you cannot afford the silly prejudices that afflict the rest of humanity.

**SOMEHOW WHEN THESE LEPERS SAW JESUS THEY KNEW HE COULD HELP THEM.**

John Haggai tells about Charles G. Finney, a lawyer of great intellect and scholarship, who became an evangelist after his conversion and made a greater impact on America than anyone else of his time. He had no entourage, no press corps; no public relations advance team, no public address system. Yet under his preaching, 30,000 people professed faith in Christ each week during one six week period. His most vigorous detractors begrudgingly admitted that he had an air of authority about him that commanded attention and respect. They told of one time when he walked into a textile mill in New York. Before he was introduced, before he had said a word, all eyes turned on him. And even more remarkably, many asked how to get right with God. Nearly the entire work force repented of their sins and professed faith in Christ. He had an authority that captured their attention.

One might expect that Jesus had an even greater “air of authority” than that. “Jesus, Master,” the lepers cried out, “Have mercy upon us.” How could Jesus deny their request? That is why he had come. His kingdom was not one of power and might but of loving service. We sometimes forget that, even in the church.

Dr. Joe Harding tells a humorous story about a man who injured his thumb on the job. He was told by his foreman to go to the clinic. He stepped inside and saw an empty room with only a desk and two chairs. Toward the back of the room there were two doors, one marked “Illness” and the other marked, “Injury.” The man thought to himself, “I am not sick, I have just hurt my thumb.” He walked through the door marked “Injury.” He found himself in a second room. It was empty except for a desk and two chairs. Toward the back door there were two doors, one marked “Internal”, and the other marked “External.” The man thought, “It’s my thumb that’s hurt, not something inside.” He walked through the door marked “External. He found himself still in another room. It was empty except for a desk and two chairs. Toward the back of the room there were two doors, one marked, “Therapy” and the other marked “Treatment”. He thought to himself, “I don’t need counseling or therapy. What I really need is to have this thumb treated.” 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 the 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 just my thumb that is hurt.” He walked through the door marked “Minor”. He found himself outside the clinic on the street. He walked back to the job sight and went to work. The foreman saw him and said, “Were they able to help you?” The man said, “I’m not sure, but I will tell you one thing, that is the best organized outfit I have ever seen!” Ouch, that hurts! Organization is a wonderful thing. An effective church needs to be well organized. But the best organized church in the world might as well be torn down if it is not truly helping people.

Jesus’ whole reason for being was to reach out to people. When Jesus saw these lepers, he said to them, “Go show yourselves to a priest.” The Old Testament required the cured leper to have his cure validated by the temple priest. Jesus required an act of faith out of these lepers. They were to begin their pilgrimage to the temple even before they were healed. Luke tells us that, as they were journeying to show themselves to the priest they were healed. Can you not 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 that they had been made whole. They must have been delirious with joy.

A man who played the French horn in the Salvation Army band used to say, “When I think of what the Lord has done for me, I could just blow this old horn our straight.” That is how these ten lepers must have felt. One of them did more than blow the party horn, though. One of them went back to Jesus to say, “Thank you.” That one was a Samaritan.

That was important to Luke, the Gentile writer. “Were not ten cleansed,” asked Jesus? “Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give thanks but this foreigner?” And he said to that grateful Samaritan, “Rise and go your way, your faith has made you well.” 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 spiritual cripple if you have not learned to say, “Thank you.”

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, ideally, we ought to give and not expect anything in return. 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 something about the kind of person you are.

There was a motion picture several years ago entitled “Song of Norway.” It was about Edvard Grieg’s struggle to succeed as a composer. Grieg had a friend who assisted him during his time of struggle. Indeed, Grieg’s friend poured his life into making this brilliant young composer a success. Later this friend lay dying and he sent word to Grieg, “Come 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. That 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.

Saying “Thank you” is also a statement of our faith. St. Paul 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 a joy and a peace that is beyond price.

Some of you may have read the bestseller by Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*. It is a delightful portrayal of small town eccentricities. One of the more memorable characters is Brother Louie. Brother Louie was a member of the Brethren Church (The Brethren, like the Lutherans, all 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 exceeded all others in his vehicular piety. His car, a fairlane four door, was a rolling display of Scripture, 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 armrests, 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. Brother Louie kept a plastic bucket by his left leg, where he kept 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, oncoming 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 blessing 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 wonderful. 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 a statement of faith and more importantly it is a statement of grace.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to saying, "Thank you" is our pride. We don't like acknowledging our dependence on anybody even God. We fancy ourselves to be self-made men and women. We like to think that we have no one to thank but ourselves. How blind we are. I am convinced that this is the primary detriment to joy in the church today. How can we thank God for our deliverance from sin and death when we are convinced that we are already pretty good people who deserve everything God has given us? We don't see our sickness, so how can we thank our Physician.

The Associated Press carried a story some time ago about a Seattle woman who has renewed her search for the US Army doctor who saved her life in a Nazi death camp after WWII. "I wish I could talk to him, and thank him and tell him it's wonderful to see him again at last" the native of Czechoslovakia said. In May, 1945, just after the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria was liberated by US troops, the doctor treated Josephina for malnutrition. She had spent five months in concentration camps and had not eaten in six weeks. Josephina remembers the kindness and respect the doctor showed by keeping her covered as he examined her. She moved to Seattle in 1950. At that time 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 that same impulse when God rescued him from guilt of his life as a slave trader. You and I are good, decent people. We are not slave traders. Still, if we could look deep into our heart of hearts, we would see a decay and 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 the divine, 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 the God of all creation accepts us and loves us and gave his Son in our behalf.

Saying thank you is a statement of character, a statement of faith, a statement of grace and finally, saying thank you is a statement of worship. That is why we are here this morning. That is what our hymns are about and our offering and our architecture. It is our humble way of saying, "Thank You." That is why worship is not optional for the Christian. It is what being a Christian is all about.

Chief Dan George in his book, "My Heart Soars," described that kind of gratitude when he tells about his love for his father. He writes, "I remember as a little boy, fishing with him up Indian River and I can still see him as the sun rose above the mountain top in the early morning...I can see him standing by the water's edge with his arms raised above his head while he softly moaned..." "Thank You, Thank You." It left a deep impression on my young mind."

That's why we are here this morning. To say, "Thank you... Thank you for healing us and loving us and watching over us." I suppose that scarcely one out of ten 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.