**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THANKFUL FAITH**

**Luke 17:11-19**

**INTRODUCTION**

What is faith? Faith is kind of like the word “love”. We use it all the time but we’re not sure exactly how to define it.

When most people try to define “faith”, they say it means belief in a higher power. It doesn’t matter what higher power it may be. If you believe that there is a supernatural being who transcends humanity, then you’re said to have “faith”. That’s why people as diverse as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians are all commonly called “people of faith”. We all believe in a higher power.

From a Biblical perspective, however, we know that faith doesn’t only mean belief in a higher power. After all, as the Apostle James said, even demons believe in God, but no one would say that they have faith.

So what is faith? I defined it last Sunday when we looked at Luke 17:5 where the apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” and Jesus replied that if they had faith like a grain of mustard seed, they could say to the mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey them.

Faith is clearly a good thing. It’s a powerful thing. It’s something that we should want more of, but what is it?

Faith is similar to “trust”. When we say we have faith *in someone*, we’re saying that we trust them to be able to accomplish something. Faith comes and goes. It can be present in some contexts but absent in others. Take my daughter Lily, for example. I have faith in her when it comes to obedience. I trust that, when Nina and I tell her to do something, she’ll do it right away with a smile on her face. But when it comes to other things, I don’t have faith in her. I don’t have faith in her to drive a car. I don’t have faith in her to babysit her brothers. I don’t have faith in her in those contexts because she’s not competent to do those things, at least not yet.

Lack of faith can be related to competence, but it can also be related to something else: character. If Lily started ignoring Nina and me or disobeying our instructions, we wouldn’t trust her to obey any more, not because of lack of competence, but because of lack of character. She would have shown herself to be untrustworthy and undeserving of our faith not because she couldn’t do the tasks well, but because she was a rebel who didn’t respect our authority.

When we lack faith in someone, it’s either because they lack competence, or they lack character, so the question for us is, why do we so often lack faith in God? Does he lack competence? No, he’s *omnipotent*, which means that he can do anything and everything he wants to. God’s *omnipotence* means that he is *omnicompetent.* Well if he doesn’t lack competence, then he must lack character right? Again, no. He is *holy*, meaning that his character is perfect. Unlike us, God is completely without the stain of sin.

God is omnipotent and holy. He is all-powerful and always good. We know this, and yet there are so many times when we just don’t trust him. We lack faith in God. So how do we get more faith? And once we get it, what does the life of someone with faith look like?

These are the questions that Jesus is going to help us answer in our text today. Luke 17 doesn’t tell us everything that the Bible has to say about faith, but it does show us the important relationship between faith and something that we rarely associate with faith: thanksgiving.

We have spoken about the centrality of thanksgiving to the Christian life at our church many times, and here, Jesus gives us another reason why thanksgiving is crucial to our spiritual well-being. We need to be like the apostles and ask God to “Increase our faith”, and if we do, I believe that understanding this connection between faith and thanksgiving and applying it to our lives is one of the ways God will answer that prayer.

The title of this message is **Thankful Faith.** My aim today is to show you that **Faith Isn’t Faith Without Thanksgiving.** We will have three points today:

1. Faith Praises God
2. Faith Thanks Jesus
3. Faith Heals the Soul

(1) **FAITH PRAISES GOD**

Our text today begins in verse 11 with Luke reminding us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Recall that Luke’s Gospel is broken up into three parts. The first part is Jesus’ birth and early ministry in the towns and villages surrounding Jerusalem, and the focus of that part is on Jesus’ identity. Who is he, and where does he come from? Luke’s answer is that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and he proves his point by focusing heavily on Jesus’ miracles and his authority to forgive sins.

The second part is Jesus’ journey towards Jerusalem, which moves on from the question of Jesus’ identity to focus on his teaching. There aren’t many miracles in this section of Luke’s Gospel, and where there is a miracle, Luke’s no longer focusing on what it says about who Jesus is, but on what Jesus wants to teach about what it means to follow him.

The third part is Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, which moves us to the climax of the Gospel. The focus of this third and final section of the gospel is on Jesus’ death and resurrection and the beginning of a new community of God’s people who follow and worship the Christ.

In short, the entire book is centered on Jerusalem, because Jesus’ life is centered on what happens there: his death and resurrection. He lived to die, and he died to rise. So when Luke writes verses like verse 11 to remind his readers that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, he’s prompting us to read the following verses under the shadow of the cross. He’s encouraging us to find the gospel trajectory in the text, the elements that point us to Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, but he makes a few stops on the way. We see that in verse 12, where we see that Jesus entered a village somewhere between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered that village, he’s met by ten lepers “who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’”

We’ve encountered lepers in Luke’s Gospel on a few occasions already, but let me remind you of who they were. Lepers were people who had a highly contagious skin disease that required them to live in isolation. This meant that becoming a leper didn’t just affect someone physically. It affected them relationally. It meant that they could no longer live at home with their families in their communities. They had to remove themselves from everyone they loved, and spend the rest of their days hoping to find companionship from other lepers.

That’s likely why there were ten lepers who approached Jesus all at once. This was a little community of lepers who spent their days together. It’s also why the ten “stood at a distance” from Jesus. Jesus wasn’t a leper, and therefore, these ten lepers weren’t allowed to approach him. They were social outcasts who no longer belonged to ordinary society.

But Jesus’ appearance changed everything for them. With Jesus here, they finally had some hope! They had apparently heard of Jesus and his miracles, how he had cast out demons, how he had fed more than five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, and how he had healed people. Now they hoped he would do the same for them. If he would just take away their leprosy, then life could finally go back to normal. Their bodies would be restored, their relationships would be restored, and they could enjoy the rest of their lives with their loved ones.

So it’s quite understandable that, when they spotted Jesus, they didn’t waste the opportunity. All ten of them lifted up their voices and cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” How would Jesus respond? A lesser man would have recoiled in disgust at this physically deformed group of outcasts. A better man would have said, “I’m sorry, I don’t have time. I’m on my way to Jerusalem.” But a perfect man would do what Jesus did in verse 14: “When he saw them he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.”

What Jesus is doing here is he’s applying Leviticus 14, which says that lepers who believed that they had been freed from leprosy were to show themselves to the priests, who had the responsibility of confirming that it was true. So while the lepers are still calling out to Jesus, he essentially says to them, “You’re already healed” even though they didn’t see it yet. And that’s exactly what happened. As the ten lepers set off to find the priests, Luke tells us at the end of verse 14 that “as they went they were cleansed.”

Just like that, they were healed. Jesus didn’t touch them, Jesus didn’t say, “Be healed”. Their leprosy simply disappeared as they journeyed towards the priests.

This was no doubt an amazing miracle, but like I said earlier, the miracle isn’t the point. What Jesus wants to teach us about what it means to follow him is the point, which is what the remaining verses are about. Nine of the lepers drop out of the story in verses 15-19, and only one remains, and this one former leper has much to teach us about faith.

All of these lessons are captured within a single, simple act in verses 15-16: “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.”

This is the central feature of our text today. In fact, Jesus spends the rest of verses 17-19 commenting on what he did! What he did wasn’t complicated, but it was extremely profound, because it shows us how thanksgiving is central to faith.

Jesus tells us that this was an act of faith in verse 19, where he says, “Rise and go your way; your *faith* has made you well.” This leper possessed a faith that none of the other nine lepers had. All of them believed that Jesus could heal them, but not all of them had faith in the biblical sense, because faith isn’t the same as belief. Faith is much more than that. This one leper had that faith, and it led to a healing that went much deeper than his leprosy.

So what was different about his faith? What did he have that the other nine didn’t? The only difference between him and the others is the fact that he gave thanks. He takes the same loud voice he used to get Jesus’ attention and fills it with praise to God. This is what Jesus calls faith. This is the faith that Jesus commends him for.

But what does thanksgiving have to do with faith? That’s the key question here, and it leads to the key insight of our text, which is that true faith will always produce thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the necessary fruit of faith, the sign that you have faith in its full, biblical sense.

Think about it like this. Say you have an urgent need in your life. You’re sick, or you need a job, or your child is about to do something foolish. Something’s not right in your life, and you want to fix it. So, you do what any faithful Christian would do. You pray. You pray that God would fix what’s wrong in your life, and you believe that he can. In fact, your belief is so strong that you know that he’s the only one who can fix it.

So you pray, and you pray, and what happens? God actually answers your prayer. You recover from your sickness, you find a job, or your child comes to you for advice instead of moving foolishly ahead. God fixed your problem. And then what do you do? You say, “Alright, now that that’s taken care of, I can carry on with my life.”

Does that sound familiar? It sounds like the nine lepers, doesn’t it? That’s exactly what they did. They came to Jesus with a problem, they believed that only he could fix it, and when he did, they carried on with their lives. That’s not faith. Do you know why? Because they weren’t trusting in God. They were trusting in themselves.

You see, there’s a way that we can come to God trusting in him, and there’s a way that we can come to God trusting in ourselves. If you say, “*I’m* going to fix my problem, and the way that *I’m* going to fix it is by praying”, then you’re not trusting in God. You’re trusting in yourself. Prayer just happens to be the method you’ve chosen to fix your problem yourself.

That’s why, when your problem is fixed, you don’t thank God. You don’t praise him. Instead, you give yourself a little pat on the back and carry on with life as usual.

But if you come to God in faith, trusting him and not yourself, then *he* gets the credit when your prayers are answered. Not you. *He* gets the thanksgiving, not us.

The presence or absence of thanksgiving reveals where we’ve put our trust. If you’re thankful to God, meaning that you’re more motivated to worship him, spend time with him, and obey him, then it shows that you trusted him. Your faith was in him. But if you don’t trust God, you’ll respond like the nine lepers who had zero motivation to grow in their relationship with God. They simply carried on with their lives as if they had fixed their problem themselves rather than God.

This is the first lesson the leper teaches us about faith. Faith praises God.

(2) **FAITH THANKS JESUS**

Faith doesn’t stop there though. It praises God the Father for meeting your need, and then it turns to God the Son and thanks him for being the reason why the need was met. This leads to our second point about faith: Faith Thanks Jesus.

We see that in verse 16, where the healed leper “fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.”

This is significant. The man is thanking *God* for his healing in verse 15, praising him with a loud voice, and then he finds Jesus in verse 16 and give thanks to *him*. There is a subtle but powerful Christological claim here. Luke is bringing a bit of Part I into Part II by reminding us of Jesus’ identity. The man thanks God, and then he thanks Jesus. Could Jesus, then, be God? Luke doesn’t say this outright, but the suggestion is there. If it is fitting to praise Jesus for what we would only praise God for, then it follows that Jesus is God.

We see this suggestion in the man’s response. He knows that God is responsible for his healing, but then what does he do? Does he go to the Temple to offer sacrifices? Does he continue on his way to visit the Priests? No, he turns back to find Jesus so that he can thank *him*. His thanksgiving to God turned into thanksgiving to Jesusbecause he knew that Jesus was doing God’s work.

Whether the man actually knew that Jesus was God in the flesh is unclear, but what’s clear is this: the man understood that Jesus was God’s agent in the world, the One sent by God to do God’s work on God’s behalf.

This is the second thing that the healed leper teaches us about faith. Faith thanks Jesus, because it knows that Jesus is the One who mediates God’s work in our lives.

This can be hard for some people to understand, especially those who come from a Catholic background. If you ask your average Catholic whether they believe in God, they’ll likely say, “Oh yes, absolutely.” They’ll say God is real, that he answers prayer, that he is merciful, etc. But if you go on and ask them what they believe about Jesus, you’ll hear a lot more uncertainty in their answers. I know some Catholics who will speak of Jesus as the Son of God and their personal Saviour, but your average Catholic will likely say something like, “Well, I know Jesus was a man who taught about God, and he probably did some miracles, but I’m not really sure who he was or why he matters.”

That’s not biblical faith. It may be faith in a generic sense because it expresses belief in God, and maybe even trust in God, but in order to be *biblical* faith, it must see Jesus as the One who mediates God’s work to us. If you understand this, then your relationship with Jesus will be the same as your relationship with God. You will trust Jesus as you trust God, and you will love Jesus as you love God.

This kind of faith isn’t common. In fact, one of the points Jesus makes in our text is that a lot of people who think that they have faith don’t have faith at all. The supposed “insiders” are actually “outsiders”. We see that at the end of verse 16 where Luke tells us that the leper who returned “was a Samaritan”. Samaritans were religious compromisers. They had Jewish ancestry, but over time, they had developed their own practices and rules when it came to worship, and as a result, the Jews despised them. They saw Samaritans as being unfaithful to the God of Israel.

The other nine, however, were likely Jewish. They were supposed to be the faithful ones, the ones who had true faith. They worshipped God at the Temple in Jerusalem, they offered sacrifices there as the Law of Moses required, and they had a confident expectation that the Messiah was coming. If anyone was expected to respond to Jesus with faith, it was the other nine lepers, not this foreigner.

But they didn’t. They went on their way as if Jesus was a nobody. They completely ignored him and took their healing for granted.

Jesus expresses his disappointment with the nine, ungrateful lepers in verses 17-18: “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Jesus expected all ten to respond to their healing with praise to God, and he expected them to praise God by returning to *him*, but all of them failed except this one foreigner, a Samaritan.

Faith isn’t always where we would expect it. It’s absent where we think it should be present, and it’s present where we think it should be absent. The important thing about faith isn’t *who* you are. It’s about *how* you respond to God’s gifts. True faith will respond to God’s gifts with thanksgiving to Jesus, because Jesus is the One who makes God’s work in our lives possible.

(3) **FAITH HEALS THE SOUL**

Now you may be wondering why any of this matters. You may be thinking, “Who cares if people have biblical faith or not. What’s important is that their faith is meaningful to them.” It matters because having true, biblical faith – the kind that praises God for his work and thanks Jesus for making it possible – is the only thing that can heal our souls. This leads to our third point and to verse 19.

After Jesus expresses his disappointment in the nine who left, he turns to the one who returned and says, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.” Jesus is talking about a deeper healing that took place in the man because of his faith. It was a healing of the soul. He had already been made well physically, and now because of his faith, Jesus is telling him that he had been made well spiritually.

You see, the man wasn’t just sick on the outside. He was sick on the inside, and he needed to be healed on the inside way more than he needed to be healed on the outside. His physical illness was really only a picture of the much more serious sickness of his heart, a sickness called sin. But Jesus healed him of that as well because of his thankful faith.

The reality is that all of us are just like lepers. When we picture lepers with their deformed faces and rotting skin, we should be thinking, “That’s what my sin looks like. My heart is sick with sin just like lepers were sick with leprosy.” But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus wants to heal us of that sickness just as much as he wanted to heal the lepers, and that’s what he did through his death and resurrection.

Jesus took our sin upon himself and put it to death through his death on the cross, and he raised us to new life when he rose from the dead, so that we no longer need to call out to him from a distance like lepers. We can come close to him and fall down at his feet with thanksgiving as clean and purified people.

This healing of the soul is only possible through Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the only way it can be received is through faith, a *thankful* faith that responds to Jesus with thanksgiving and praise for saving us from our sin. If you come to Jesus like this, then he says to you, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

The other nine didn’t hear those words, because they weren’t made well, and they weren’t made well because they didn’t have faith. Yes, they believed that Jesus could heal them, and yes they came to Jesus and asked him for help. But they never trusted him. They never thanked him. They never had a relationship with him or desired to know him. And because of this, they remained just as sick with sin as ever. Their outward appearance may have been restored, but their inner being was still wasting away.

This text reminds us that there are people who come to God in desperate need, people who cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on me!”, even people who see God work powerfully in their lives, and yet they’re not spiritually well. They’ve never been healed or forgiven of their sin. They’re just as spiritually dead after God worked in their lives as they were before.

God in his goodness has mercy on those who call on him, whether they’re Christians or not. He heals them, he provides for them, he sends his rain on the just and the unjust. But God’s ultimate mercy – the mercy that says, “Your sins have been paid for and your heart has been cleansed” – is only given to those who have faith, those who trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour and respond to him with a thanksgiving that leads to relationship.

This is what we’re asking for when we pray, “Lord, increase our faith!” We’re praying for a greater trust in Christ that will express itself in a life of thanksgiving and praise.

**CONCLUSION**

Let me conclude by addressing two groups of people.

The first group is for those who already have true, saving faith in Christ. Perhaps thanksgiving already characterizes your life, or perhaps it’s been a difficult struggle recently. Wherever you are, the reality is that all of us need more faith. All of us need to pray, “Lord, increase our faith!” And if we need more faith, we can always become more thankful people.

Here are some practical suggestions for you to build thanksgiving into your life. First, think about starting a thanksgiving journal, an idea that Pastor Tim has given to many people over the years. Every day, write down 3-5 things you’re thankful for. They can be anything, from your conversion to the clothes you wear. The only rule is that you write something new every day. No repeats. Then when you’ve written those things down, spend some time in prayer giving thanks to God for them. Share them with your family or your friends. Do this for a month at a time a few times a year, and I believe you’ll become a more thankful person.

Another idea is to start a prayer journal. Write down what you’re praying for so that you don’t forget what you’re asking God for, because if you forget, then it’s unlikely that you’ll give thanks to God when he answers your prayers. Of course, there are big things we ask God for that we’re unlikely to forget – the salvation of a family member, provision of a needed job, etc – but the vast majority of prayers are smaller requests. “Lord, make me a more patient person; teach my kids to forgive one another graciously; grant me a clear mind when I write my exam.” Writing these kinds of requests down will help us respond to God’s provision and mercy with thanksgiving.

One more suggestion. Take advantage of our monthly testimony times, which happen after communion on the first Sunday of the month. Over and over again, the Bible talks about how God’s people will publicly declare God’s work in their lives. For example, Psalm 40:9 says,

“I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD.”

Sharing a public testimony of God’s work in your life is one of the most important and practical ways we can give thanks to him. So, when you know a testimony Sunday is coming up, I encourage you to sit down and write out a short testimony, just a few minutes long, giving thanks to God for his work in your life.

These suggestions are for those who already have a thankful faith that has made them spiritually well. But if that’s not you, if you’ve never trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and responded to him with a thankful faith, you can do that today. You don’t have to just call out, “Lord, have mercy on me” from a distance. You can come right up to him and receive healing for your soul. Don’t be like the nine who experienced God’s power and presence and went on with their lives as if nothing had happened. Be like this one, healed leper, the Samaritan, who came back to Jesus in thanksgiving and surrender.