

Luke 17:11-19

Narrator: On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying,

Lepers: Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!

Narrator: When he saw them, he said to them,

Jesus: Go and show yourselves to the priests.

Narrator: And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked,

Jesus: Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.

Nurturing Gratitude

1. I'd like you to indulge me in a little exercise: close your eyes, and think about the person you are or were most in love with. Are you envisioning that person? Now remember the early days when you first fell in love with that person. Hold that thought, and try to feel the way you felt back then...and maybe you still feel that way about that person. If that person is next to you, you can hold their hand. Remember those early days of your love. Now remember that first date; in fact, think back to the time just before that first date, to the time you invited the person on that date and remember how you felt when you asked the person on the date, or if you were the one being asked on that first date, remember how you felt when you were asked on that date. Okay, now you can stop.
2. How would you describe your feelings? Scared? Excited? Giddy? Perhaps you were scared if you were the one asking that special person out on a date – afraid of saying something stupid, afraid of rejection – *but you asked nonetheless*, and that took some courage. If you were the one *being asked*, it

took *you* some courage to say “yes.” Now we all have different dating experiences, but we all felt that same love toward another person, and we would all likely agree that love is a *feeling* and that love causes us to do things that are out of the ordinary. We will spend weeks preparing for senior prom, we will groom ourselves meticulously in front of a mirror for hours, we will spend hundreds (or these days, *thousands*) of dollars on a limo and a tuxedo and a dinner at a nice restaurant, a dress and new shoes and perfume and a manicure and getting our hair done, for a single person for a single evening, and we do all of this for a *feeling* that we have for another person. It makes no sense! But of course we do it, and do it joyfully because of the way we feel about someone else.

3. So if I asked you if human beings act more out of *emotion* or *logic* what would you say? *I* would say emotion. Sure, there are decisions that we make that are based on logic – which car to buy and which cell phone service plan best suits us – but when we think about the most important relationships we have in life, those relationships are driven by emotion, not logic. It makes great sense for you to take all the money that you save and invest it in stocks or real estate or just put it in the bank rather than renting a limousine or buying an engagement ring, but we act based on how we *feel*, not how we think. We climb every mountain, and swim the deepest sea, and stay up at night fretting about our relationship with our beloved.

4. And our relationship with God is no different. We are all here because we have a *belief* in God and hopefully this is a place where that relationship is nurtured, and if that relationship with God is *not* nurtured here, as a pastor I will tell you that you should leave and find a place where your relationship with God *is* nurtured. I believe that just as our relationship with our significant other is emotion-driven (that is, driven by *love*), so too our relationship with God should be emotion-driven (that is, driven by *love*). Right now we’re doing a book study on Methodism, and we’re now reading about the early days of John Wesley when he was really struggling with his faith, because he wasn’t really sure that he had any faith. He knew his theology – he thought about God very logically (what was God’s nature, what was expectation of a Christian, and what was required to attain salvation), he prayed to God, he did lots of good works to please God, but he didn’t have a relationship with God. He didn’t love God (the same was true of Martin Luther). What changed John Wesley was an emotional experience of God or with God – something about God’s love became something that he

experienced; he describes it as his heart being strangely warmed. And that was the experience that propelled him into evangelism for the rest of his life.

5. It's not complex theology that brings us to God; it's rather the experience of God's love, an experience that results from our innate *need* for God – like the need that these ten lepers had to be healed. We may not have a physical need that draws us to God for healing; ours may be more a spiritual need. I had such a spiritual need in my early days of college; it was a need to know that I was loved despite all my sins and transgressions, and Christ came to me and fulfilled that need and he came to those ten lepers and filled their need. Unfortunately it was the theology that was preached by so many of my friends and colleagues that drove me away from the church – I felt God's unconditional love, and they kept trying to explain that God places conditions on it. Their theology did not match my experience, and I decided that my relationship with God was much more important than my relationship with *their* church. And though I did not belong to their church I eventually found a church where the people expressed their love and gratitude to the God that I had experienced, the God of unconditional love.
6. Today's scripture lesson is about sincere Thanksgiving. Ten lepers approach Jesus; ten lepers are healed. Jesus instructs all of them to go show themselves to the priests – that was an essential step that a leper had to take in order to be restored to the community; the priest had to examine the leper to determine whether the person had truly healed and could thus return to the community. That was the practical, *logical* action that the leper had to take in order to be reintegrated into society. And nine of those lepers acted logically, doing what the law required for them to get their lives back to normal. But one leper acted on emotion more than logic. One leper felt gratitude to a degree that the other nine did not, felt it to the extent that he actually defied the instructions he was given and instead went back to Jesus, bowed down at his feet and worshiped him. He was really in church at that moment; he was acting on feelings and truly engaged in heartfelt worship.
7. If you think that the message of this scripture passage is that we have to show gratitude to Jesus you're missing the point, because true gratitude is not contrived. It is not something that can be mandated, because it's something you have to feel. I remember that I was taught as a child to say "thank you" to my grandparents for the Christmas presents they gave me, whether I liked them or not, and I was too narcissistic to express any true gratitude – I was either happy about what they had given me or I wasn't, but

gratitude was not in my emotional repertoire. I was too spoiled; I think I needed to feel a much stronger *need* for something before I could feel gratitude.

8. So the question is, “Do you feel sincere gratitude toward God?” If so, you’re in the right place; worship is a way that we express our gratitude. If not, you’re not necessarily in the *wrong* place. But you need to make some effort to notice the things that God does in your life for which you should be grateful. I suggest you start writing them down throughout the day, and at the end of the day, read through your list and say “thank you” to God. The more things you write and the more time you spend saying “thank you” the more likely you are to feel true gratitude. And as you continue the practice, worship will become more like a date, a date with Jesus. As you begin to see God’s goodness and grace, you will *want* to spend your time with him and rejoice in his presence, and rejoice in worship.