

THE BENEFIT OF THANKSGIVING

By Paul Penno Jr.

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One day Bill Morris went out hunting in the woods just outside Prince George in British Columbia, Canada. It had been a slow day and he hadn't found any game to shoot. Suddenly, he heard a noise behind him. He whirled around and saw two ferocious looking bears coming towards him. He quickly raised his rifle to his shoulder, took aim and pulled the trigger. Click. Nothing. The rifle misfired. He reloaded and fired again Click! Click! Click! Again, nothing. The gun just wasn't working. By this time, the bears were almost on top of him. In desperation, he threw down his rifle and ran. But the faster he ran, the closer the bears got. Finally Bill came to the edge of a cliff. As there was nowhere to go, he dropped to his knees and began to pray. "O Lord, I pray that you make these bears Christian bears."

As Bill looked up, he was surprised to see the bears kneeling just a few feet away from him. And as he listened, he heard one bear pray: "For what we are about to receive, may the Good Lord make us truly thankful. Amen."

Years ago Abraham Lincoln and his law partner argued this point while riding through the country. When they spied a pig caught in a rail fence, Herndon was all for passing it by. But Lincoln alighted from the buggy, waded through a ditch, climbed a muddy embankment, and pulling two rails apart, released the pig. Herndon pointed

triumphantly to Lincoln's muddy shoes and spattered trousers, saying, "You see now that I am right. Men are capable of performing unselfish deeds."

"Oh, no," replied Lincoln, "if I had left that pig in the fence, I would have worried about him all night tonight. I would have been so busy wondering if someone had rescued him or if he were still held between those rails, that I would have lost my sleep. For my own peace of mind, I had to rescue the animal."

Did you ever have the experience of giving to one in need, and continuing to do so until no longer possible to keep it up, and then finding that what you had done only made the individual feel that you were under special obligations to him, and had grievously wronged him when your giving ceased?

It is an experience which reveals the darkest side of human nature. Yet so weak is human nature that nearly every one who has had anything to do with business management, and with all sorts and conditions of men, knows something about it. Instead of thankfulness for favors received, which perhaps required real self-denial on the part of the giver, the recipient shows only hatred when the favors cease. It is only the bestial and brutal in depraved natures that wounds the hand that blesses, and knows no such sentiment as thankfulness.

As the story goes, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States during the country's Civil War, once reprimanded a young army surgeon for being ungrateful to his mother, who had sold all her

household treasures to pay for his education. Lincoln looked out the window at the bleak November sky and said to the young man,

“Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky;
Thou dost not bite so nigh as
benefits forgot.”

When one feels depressed over such an experience, it is a good time to think about the favors which the Lord has granted to all men. He has given us “life, and breath, and all things,” and yet sometimes we have taken these things as our due, by justice, and have not thanked the Lord from the very soul for these common blessings which come so bountifully.

Really, the Lord has already blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:3); “the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men” (Titus 2:11); but all men will not take what is brought to them, and men are often so faithless that they do not believe that all blessings have been given; and so they take from the Lord continually, without thankfulness, and at every trial or misfortune are ready to charge God with injustice.

With a wistful smile the young widow watched her three children open their Christmas presents. Money was short, but with the help of her mother, she had tried to make this, the first Christmas without their father, a happy one for her children. Besides new bicycles to replace the outgrown ones her two oldest rode constantly every summer, she had purchased some necessary pajamas and a special toy or two for each. She had spent long

hours making clothes for the doll that she gave her daughter. She was proud of the way the pink dress had turned out, long with layers of ruffles going up the skirt.

The recipient of the doll with its lovingly-fashioned wardrobe was thinking too as she watched the last presents being opened. But her thoughts were neither brave nor unselfish, for, as she looked at her pile of presents and at the piles of gifts belonging to her younger brother and sister, she detected what she imagined was an unfair distribution. The longer she thought about it, the more certain she became that she had been shortchanged that Christmas morning. It seemed to her that mother was playing favorites. As she dwelled on her “less-favored” status, tears welled up in her eyes and overflowed, sobs quickly following.

Naturally, such an outburst did not go unnoticed; mother and grandmother quickly sought the reason. “I didn’t get very much,” wailed the girl. I often wonder at the patience of a mother who surely would have been justified in throwing up her hands, rushing out of the room, and wailing herself.

Unthankfulness is a great sin. It was because man glorified not God, “neither were thankful,” when they knew Him, that the world went into heathenism. Romans 1:21-25. The same unthankfulness changes professed Christians into actual unbelievers. In these cultured days men do not always give up the profession, the form; but the person who receives life and all things from God, and takes them without thanksgiving as a matter of

course, is just as much a heathen as the man who does the same thing without the profession. It is unspeakably mean for a man to treat another man in this unthankful manner. Is it not unspeakably mean for man to treat the Lord in the same manner when He has given His “unspeakable gift”?

People who have an ungrateful attitude actually believe they have done it all themselves. “Why should I be thankful?” they think. “Everything I have, I earned! If I’m going to thank anybody, I’ll thank me.” Now, I’m not saying old fashioned hard work and effort isn’t important, but if you take the “I’ve done it all myself” attitude to it’s logical conclusion it eventually becomes “I’ve done it all myself in the past and so it’s all up to me in the future. I don’t need people. I don’t need God. I’ll carry the load all by myself.” Psychologists tell us that that pattern of thinking is a sure-fire recipe for all kinds of mental illness beginning with stress and leading to anxiety and depression. That’s why an ungrateful attitude is a road map to the loony bin whereas a grateful attitude is a constant connection to God.

Of all the diseases to which mankind is heir there is none more loathsome than leprosy. The individual lives for years with this dread disease slowly eating away portions of the body, until he longs for death as a release. Hansen’s disease was one of the most dreaded of diseases. It disfigured its sufferers almost beyond recognition. It was a scourge of humankind for thousands of years, and was considered incurable. Because of fear of contagion and the belief that leprosy was a punishment from God, victims throughout the

centuries were removed from the “civilized” world, forced into isolation, and stigmatized for life. Leprosy is a very fitting type of the loathsome spiritual disease of sin, which destroys the soul of the individual that violates his conscience again and again until he loses all power to resist, and becomes wholly surrendered to evil. From earliest times, leprosy has been a type of sin. The leper was not allowed to mingle with the people. There was no exception, from the king on the throne to the lowliest bond-servant.

For the early Jews, leprosy was the most fearsome of diseases. Social ostracism was strong. Lepers would come down the street saying, “Unclean.” “Unclean.” “Unclean.”

Well, ten such lepers came to Jesus of Nazareth. “Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem with His disciples, and was passing through Samaria and Galilee; and as He entered into a certain village, there met Him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off; and they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” Luke 17:11.

Note that the lepers stood “afar off.” This was in accordance with the law. Remembering that sin is uncleanness, and that the plague of leprosy is a representation of the plague of sin, let us see what we learn from this incident.

There is a Fountain opened “for sin and for uncleanness.” Zech. 13:1. The blood of Jesus Christ “cleanseth us from all sin.” “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John

1:7, 9. That cry, “Unclean!” which served to keep the leper separate from the rest of the people, is that which moves the heart of the compassionate Saviour, and brings Him near. In the case recorded in Luke 5:12-19 we read that “Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him.” When others draw away for fear of defilement, Jesus comes close.

Dr. Brand tells of a bright young man he was treating for leprosy in India. In the course of the examination Brand placed his hand on the patient’s shoulder, and informed him through a translator of what kind of treatment lay ahead. To his surprise, the man began to shake with muffled sobs. Brand turned to the translator to ask if he’d done something wrong. She quizzed the patient, and then answered, “No, doctor. He says he is crying because you put your hand around his shoulder. Until he came here, no one had touched him for many years.”¹

Our sin has separated us from God (Isa. 59:2), so that in our sinful condition, we were “without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.” But the promise is “to all that are afar off” (Acts 2:39) and “now in Christ Jesus we who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” Eph. 2:13. We are “saved by His life.” Rom. 5:10. The life power of Christ brought those lepers near, not only to God, but to the commonwealth of Israel. They were no longer outcasts, but, being cleansed, they

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p.171

were restored once more to their rightful place among men. The cleansing of the lepers is recorded as a pledge and illustration to us of the fact that no matter how defiled we may be by sin, Jesus has already taken us to His bosom, and places us among the rulers of His people. “He shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel.” Isa. 11:12.

The lepers recognized the working of Jesus. They addressed Him by a double name, “Jesus, Master.” The name “Jesus” means Saviour. The angel said to Joseph, “Thou shalt call His name Jesus; for He shall save his people from their sins.” Matt. 1:21. He is able to save, because He has the mastery over sin. Sin never had any dominion over Him. He was “made in the likeness of sinful flesh,” yet not the slightest trace of sin could ever be found upon Him; He had absolute dominion over it. And since He had such absolute mastery over sin that He could drive the tempter away, He had also dominion over disease and death, which is the product of sin. The cleansing from sin and the healing of disease are one and the same act.

You know what it’s like to be sick. After prolonged days of fever, nausea, sinus congestion, headaches, and muscles aches, you feel out of sorts and mentally depleted. Disease, the result of sin, has wracked your body. You pray to the Lord for deliverance, and he heals you. The salvation from the Lord is healing and forgiveness of sin.

The command of Jesus to the lepers was a test of their faith in Him. He merely said, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” They well knew what that

meant. Read Lev. 18, and 14. The priests were the physicians of Israel, and with them rested the decision as to who had the leprosy, and when a leper was cleansed. Now these men had already been before the priests, and had been pronounced unclean. They well knew that they were lepers. It was therefore wholly unnecessary for them to go to the priests, to know if they had the disease; and the words of Christ could mean nothing else than that they were to present themselves to the priests, in order to get from them the official declaration that they were clean, and so fit to mingle in society again. But they were not clean and they might very naturally have raised objections to going on what would seem an unnecessary errand. They might have argued that the priests would drive them away; but they did as they were told, and in going they found cleansing. There is this to be set down to the credit of all the ten lepers, that they all believed the word of Jesus, and started to get the official declaration of healing while they were yet in their leprous condition.

One who has been diagnosed with cancer and has to undergo surgery for its removal can receive no better news after the operation than when the physician declares that they were able to cut out all the offending tumor. There will be no need for ongoing treatment. It is good news to hear the all clear signal from the expert.

Why did Jesus send them to the priests? Not alone because that was the just requirement of the law, which He recognized, but for the reason stated in Luke 5:14, "Go, and show thyself to the priests,

and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them." The priests would be obliged to certify that these lepers were now clean; moreover, they would naturally inquire as to the manner of their healing, and thus they would receive testimony to the power of Jesus to heal disease that, in its worst form, was held to be incurable. This would leave them without excuse.

But this command to the lepers to go and bear this testimony has more for us. It shows us that "base things of the world and things which are despised, hath God chosen," to bear witness to Him. God claims every one on earth as His lawful witness. "He giveth to all life and breath and all things," even pardon for sin, since Christ died for all and by Himself made reconciliation for sin. Therefore the Lord says to the one who is even now defiled by sin, "Go, tell what great things God hath done for thee." If every one would receive this message, and would start with it, they would find cleansing in the going. The end of the Gospel is not simply our salvation, but to take us from the mire of the pit and send us as saviours of others. Whosoever heareth is commissioned to pass the message on.

In 1885, during her first year in India, missionary Mary Reed chanced to visit a hill-country colony of 500 lepers and became interested in their plight. In 1891, on her first furlough home to the U.S., she learned she had become a leper herself. Without telling her friends, she returned to India, started work among the lepers at Chandag. Because lepers have very little strength, most leprosariums have

some non-leper helpers. Chandag had none. Miss Reed preached, healed, built a church and then dormitories, nursed her lepers, organized them into a self-helping community.

Mary Reed's leprosy disappeared after nine years, leaving her with few of the deformities or mutilations common in "burned-out" cases. Mary Reed believes in Jesus. So do friends who had prayed for her on three continents.

All the lepers had faith to be healed, but not all were thankful for the healing. One turned back as soon as he felt the healing power in his body, and gave thanks to God. He could not wait to go first to the priest, but turned back at once. He obeyed the command of Jesus, to go to the priest, but he could not delay thanksgiving. And Jesus was not displeased; far from it. It was what He had reason to expect from all the others. Because of his giving thanks, this one received an assurance that was not given to them. To him the Lord said, "Thy faith hath made thee whole." Luke 17:19.

Someone may ask, "Were not the rest healed as well as he?" They certainly were cleansed, for the Scripture says so; but there was a difference between this one and the other nine. They showed their faith, it is true, by starting off at once to show themselves to the priest; but he showed his faith in a still greater measure, by returning to give thanks; for thanksgiving is the only sign of faith. He who does not give thanks is in the way to lose whatever he already has. When men knew God, they lost their knowledge of Him, and thereby the knowledge of everything that is true, simply because "they

glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful." Rom. 1:21.

Judy Eichstedt writes about her most memorable Thanksgiving. I woke up that morning feeling more tired than when I went to sleep. It is not easy resting in a car. We were parked in a rest area and I didn't have a clue what we were going to eat that day. I was feeling sorry for my children and myself. I sat in the car waiting for my children to wake and I prayed, asking God to help us. I just didn't know what to do.

My children woke and I took them to the bathrooms to clean up. Little did I know, but a truck driver had seen us when he pulled in sometime during the night and was waiting for us when we came out of the bathroom. He was an older man with a very kind face and his smile put me at ease. The man offered us a jug of juice and some doughnuts. I thanked him over and over again and he did something I didn't expect. He reached out and gave me a hug. That hug caused the tears to flow. Somebody took the time to care about us.

It's funny, but a smile and a hug seemed to chase away much of my pain and a lot of anger that was in my heart. When he left, I didn't feel so bitter, but I was truly thankful for his kindness. It was as if I received renewed strength. A family that had stopped to use the restrooms watched the man helping us and later gave us some sandwiches and chips they had made for their trip. No one looked down on us or passed judgment, but only wanted to reach out to someone in need. These strangers were not afraid to show true love to us.

I will never forget that Thanksgiving. Even though we were homeless, my family remembers it as one of the best Thanksgivings ever. I learned that even in total darkness a light does shine through when someone shares love. To truly be thankful is to honor God through loving one another.

It seems quite likely that the other lepers did not retain the blessing of cleansing that they received. One thing is certain, and that is, that unless they developed a greater degree of appreciation of the gifts of God than they had at that time, they did not know His full salvation, and therefore at the last it would be all the same with them if they had never been cleansed. For whoever loses his life at the last, might as well never have had it. There are thousands upon thousands in the world, who receive "life and breath and all things" at the hand of God, yet very few of them give glory for these gifts. Very few are thankful. Many times are they healed of disease, yet no word of thankfulness ever comes from their lips. The fact that they do not give thanks shows that they either are not conscious of having received anything special, or that they do not recognize God as the Giver. In either case it shows that they do not live in conscious connection with Him. They do not allow Him to be the ruling power in their lives, and so do not live righteously. They do not know the salvation of God; they are ignorant of the fullness of redemption that there is in Christ Jesus. So at the last day they will lose their souls; their lives will go out, and they will be the same as though they had never been. Of what benefit, then, was all their healing to them? For all

the real benefit that they had had from it they might as well have died before in some illness, because they did not use the life that was continued to them to any purpose. But a constant recognition of God as the Giver of all good things, keeps us in a state of continual appropriation; therefore it is only by thanksgiving that we can keep the blessings of life and all things that God bestows.

I am deeply impressed that amid the turmoil of the modern news, civil society functions as smoothly and safely as it does. Highways are jammed with cars and trucks that almost always obey the rules and travel safely, planes crisscross the skies and meet tight schedules almost perfectly. Life for most of us is very pleasant. And one constantly meets strangers who are courteous and helpful. All that confronts us that is good is related to the gift of the Holy Spirit of God, "sent" to us by Christ and given to the world (John 14:16; 6:33).

But I am also impressed with how few seem to realize the true Source of the happiness and prosperity and security they take for granted. Of ten lepers whom the Lord Jesus healed, only one came back to tell Him "Thank you!" (Luke 17:12ff). Every civil and economic benefit we enjoy is as surely a miraculous handout from Christ as was that healing from leprosy to those "ten." Is mankind in general today as ungrateful as they were? For sure, many are unaware of what they owe and to whom they owe.

The story is told of a prisoner who sat in his death cell awaiting execution. One day a clergyman bearing a message from the governor came to see

the prisoner. As the clergyman entered the prisoner's cell, the prisoner shouted, "I don't want to see you. I need none of your prayers."

"But," the minister insisted, "I have a message for you from the governor."

When he handed the prisoner an envelope, the convict shouted, "Take it away! I don't want to hear anything from him, either."

Greatly disappointed, the minister left with the message still in his pocket. Later the warden told the prisoner, "The message you refused from the governor contained your pardon!"

It is said that when he was executed, the prisoner's last words were: "I'm dying not because I murdered a man, but because I refused a pardon."

No one will be eternally lost because he is a sinner; he will be lost because he refused the pardon given him from heaven.

According to Scripture, a tiny minority of people in the world who understand the truth are saving their fellows from disaster as surely as that tiny handful in ancient Sodom and Gomorrah who truly revered the Lord saved their cities. When the angels hurried that remnant out of the doomed cities, the fire fell—an illustration of what goes on now behind the scenes. The world owes those few thanks. But the time must come when that gracious Holy Spirit has to be withdrawn; then what? The "time of trouble" and "the seven last plagues" (Rev. 16:1-17). Let's be thoughtful and appreciative now.

I spent the last few days of my mother's life with her and my father staying up at nights moving her around from one position to another in her

discomfort. She had given instructions that when taken to the hospital for her last few days there were to be no heroic measures in preserving her life. She was just to be given pain medication to reduce her suffering. The last thing that I did before saying goodbye to her in the hospital room, was to pray with her, chocking back the tears. I repeated hugged her and kissed her and thanked her for all that she had given me in life. We reminisced about many things.

My mother died with the dignity that only the faith of Jesus can supply. She expressed her gratitude to God and His great mercies. My father has never uttered a reproachful tone toward God. His lips are always filled with praise to God for all the blessings he has bestowed upon him. If the elderly can be thankful to God in their last moments, surely we young people can be thankful too.