

## God, Change My Attitude Before It's Too Late

Attitudes: Gratitude Luke 17:11-19

February 8, 2009

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

One of the most poignant stories in the New Testament is the story of a small group of desperate men who approached Jesus for healing. These men were desperate because they had something in common. They were all lepers.

To appreciate this story, you need to understand a bit about leprosy. Let me take a moment or two to describe it as it was experienced in Jesus' day. It would begin with a general sense of fatigue and pain in the joints. Then people would begin to get patches and nodules on their skin.

The lumps eventually would make these people unrecognizable. The lumps would ulcerate, and there would be a foul stench coming from those with leprosy. They would lose their eyebrows, and their voices would get hoarse because their vocal chords would ulcerate. Their voices would rasp, and their breathing would wheeze. Then there would be a loss of sensation, which is one of the most dangerous parts of leprosy.

Paul Brandt worked with lepers in the twentieth century and wrote of being in a leper colony trying to get through a gate that was locked by a rusty padlock. He couldn't get it open. A young boy with leprosy stuck his finger up into the padlock and ground his finger around until he got the padlock to open. When he pulled his finger out, it had been gnashed to the bone. Because of the loss of sensation, the boy didn't know it.

Brandt wrote that leprosy patients would lose fingers and toes. For a long time, people thought

it was due to the disease of leprosy. Brandt and some of his researchers stayed up to watch as lepers slept through the night in a very impoverished area. Rats would come at night and gnaw on the fingers and toes of the lepers while they were sleeping. If there weren't people there to stop it, the lepers would awaken with parts of their bodies gone. They hadn't known it. Finally there would be a loss of mental functioning, which would end in coma and death.

In Jesus' day, the first sign of leprosy was like a death sentence to people. If you were a leper, you couldn't go near people who weren't lepers. You couldn't be in town, and people could pelt you with eggs or stone you if they saw you. A house that a leper went into was declared unclean. If you were touched by someone with leprosy, you were considered to be defiled. One source from the first century wrote that lepers had to stay 50 yards away from people who didn't have leprosy.

Imagine for a moment the thought of never being touched again,

- never feeling the hug of a little child,
- never having a friend reach out for your hand,
- never having a parent put their arm around your shoulder and
- never knowing the embrace of a spouse.

Leprosy was not just about physical loss. There was a moral stigma attached to leprosy in Jesus' day. When other diseases were cured, they were said to be healed. Leprosy had to be cleansed because those who had it were considered unclean and defiled.

Imagine that you are one of those 10 men with leprosy and imagine that you are in the final stages of the disease. Let's live with this for a moment. You have been to the best hospitals and consulted the finest specialists. You know the diagnosis and already are in great pain. Your body is emaciated and disfigured. There is no hope, and you are going to die.

Then something happens. One day, the pain is gone. Your body is whole. You go to a doctor not daring to hope, but the doctor tells you that the disease is gone. The nightmare is over, and you are going to live.

It happens in this story. One day 10 lepers saw Jesus. Of course, they couldn't get near him. Instead, they cried out. Jesus turned and said to them, "*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*"

If a leper were cleansed, he had to be declared clean by a priest before resuming a normal life. This is an interesting part of the story. Jesus didn't heal them first. Before they were healed, he said,

"*Go to the priest as if you already have been healed.*" Perhaps this was a test of faith. Maybe one of them said, Hey we got nothing to lose. Lets go. They all started to go. They obeyed Jesus' words.

As they were walking, something happened.

- Where their faces had been blotched and disfigured, now their skin was smooth.
- Where they just had mutilated stumps, now they had hands and feet with fingers and toes.

The nightmare was suddenly over, and hope had returned. They were going to live. Now they could run, shout, hug their kids, live in their homes, think about tomorrow and do all the things that normal people usually take for granted. This was their moment to know that every one of those things was a gift beyond calculation.

Luke wrote this story and said that 1 of the 10 saw he was healed and he stopped. He looked back. Maybe at that moment the other 9 asked him, "*Where are you going?*" He responded. *You know guys I have to go back. I have to return back to Jesus and say Thank you.*

The age old question that theologians have been asking for centuries is, Why didn't the other nine return.

Of course, we don't know. Luke doesn't say. Maybe they were in too much of a hurry. Maybe they didn't think it was necessary. It is a strange thing about human beings that we pray and pray for something so desperately, and when we receive it we take it for granted.

Only 1 of the 10 returned to Jesus. Maybe this guy started to run and marveled that his legs and arms did what he told them to do just as they used to when he was a kid. When he saw Jesus perhaps he stopped a long distance away, habit. He then realized that he didn't have to stop this time. He ran all the way to Jesus, and Luke says he fell on the ground and threw his arms at the feet of Jesus.

I'm sure we can say with certainty that this was the first contact that he had with another non-leprous person in years.—Possible since he was a child. Touch is such a powerful thing.

Anyone who has taken a class in Psychology 101 has come across the famous experiment of Harry

Harlow in the 1950's of the University of Wisconsin. He took infant monkeys and separated them from their mothers at 6 to 12 hours after birth and they were raised instead with substitute or surrogate mothers made either of a heavy wire which provided food or a wood covered with soft terry cloth which provided no food.

Consistently the baby monkeys choose the covered soft terry cloth surrogate mother over the wired surrogate mother. Those infant monkey's that did not have the privileged of spending any time with a cloth surrogate mother, died. The power of touch.

Touch is one of the most powerful forms of expressing love and affection.—to embrace somebody or to place a hand on somebody's shoulder. This leper was a man who hadn't been touched in years, but at the moment he was touched by Jesus.

Then Luke said that the guy begin to praised God with a loud voice. Luke tucked that little phrase in there. This guy just didn't praise God. He praised God with a loud voice. You can hear him thinking, "*My vocal chords work. No more wheezing. Praise God!*" The text indicates that this guy kept thanking Jesus over and over. He couldn't stop.

Luke does make one more interesting point. This one leper was a Samaritan. This was an amazing thing. Samaritans were considered to be heretics and enemies of God and Israel by the Jewish people. The other nine lepers apparently were Jewish.

This guy was a Samaritan and still he came back to Jesus who was Jewish. Maybe that is part of why

he was so grateful. Maybe he figured that he was the last guy out of that group who ever would get to touch Jesus.

Gratitude works that way. You look at gifts with a grateful heart as opposed to those who say, "*I am entitled to it.*" He ran back to Jesus, fell at his feet, touched him and thanked him. Look at how Jesus responded. Here we get a glimpse into Jesus' heart. You can see the measure of hurt in how he responds.

Jesus asked three questions:

- "Weren't there 10?"
- Where are the other nine?"
- Did only one return to praise God and him a foreigner?"
- Somebody who wouldn't be expected to know enough to come back, did. You see a deep hurt in the heart of Jesus.

Parents you know what it is like when you have sacrificially given to your child and you feel there is not an ounce of gratitude for what you did. I wonder if God feels that way about me sometimes.

Gratitude changes you and opens your heart to God. Jesus lifted this guy up and maybe embraced him. Then He said, "*Go your way. Your faith has made you whole.*"

The text literally says, "*Your faith has saved you.*"

In other words, Luke apparently wanted us to understand that this guy received more than physical life from Jesus. This guy also received eternal life.

How about you? Where is your heart in this business of gratitude? For generations when children receive a gift or favor from someone, every parent has prompted their kids with the age old question:

"What do you say?"

How is the child supposed to respond? Thank you.

John Ortberg writes:

*My parents would ask me, “What do you say to the nice man? What do you say to Aunt Eva for her Velveeta, Spam and lima bean casserole?”*

*And he goes on to say, All kids know that this really isn’t a question. Parents aren’t looking for information here. They would have been surprised if I had said, “Aunt Eva, what in the name of heaven were you thinking? Aunt Eva, you should not be allowed to prepare meals for human beings. Someone should put you away!”*

*Or my parents also would have been surprised if I had said, “Aunt Eva, I have a sense of awe and wonder at what I have experienced here. I am a child. Without an adult providing for me as you have done, I would die. You have done it freely as an act of love and service for me. Aunt Eva, you are a humanitarian. In the name of children everywhere, I salute you.”*

Even if children don’t feel gratitude, we want them to learn to offer thanks. I sometimes need to offer thanks, because it simply is the right thing to do even if I don’t feel it. I owe a debt of gratitude. Our hope is that our children won’t parrot only the words. The hope is that one day they will live with grateful hearts and become grateful people.

Gratitude is a real simple deal, which is why I have been so excited

during this series. Lord Change my Attitude Before it’s too Late.

Today, I want you to look at this area of cultivating an attitude of gratitude. This is so central.

The ability to express gratitude and offer heartfelt praise and thanksgiving is one of the fundamental signs of life and spiritual wholeness, according to the Scriptures.

*“Let me live that I might praise you,”* the psalmist said to God. Gratitude flows out of a kind of vision. It is a vision that learns to see that all of life is a gift.

One of the great thoughts that I know on the topic of gratitude comes from an author named

G. K. Chesterton. This is what he said at the end of a day:

*“Here ends another day, during which I have had eyes, ears, hands and the great world around me. Tomorrow begins another day. Why am I allowed two?”*

Some people aren’t. I will tell you why you are allowed two. It’s because you have a God who loves you and every night says, *“Now I will give you the gift of rest.”* God says every morning, *“Now wake up, and I will give you the gift of life again.”*

Life is good. There often is pain and suffering attached to it, but life itself is a good thing. As it was intended by God to be lived, life is very good and a gift. Where is your heart on this?

The alternative to a life of gratitude is another kind of heart that sometimes is my heart. This is a heart that chronically is discontent, complaining, judgmental and dis-satisfied.

This is the heart of a person who lives with a demanding spirit and without any sense or awe or wonder – *“I take people, days, weeks and months for granted. I live with a sense of entitlement. I am entitled to all that I have.”* Ingratitude makes the heart grow smaller, harder, and colder day after day. It is a miserable way to live.

If you are honest this morning, some of you would have to say, *“I really kind of live with an ungrateful heart. I often see myself as a victim. There is a bitterness and entitlement about me.”*

The thing about gratitude is that you can't force yourself to feel grateful. Gratitude involves a way of seeing, perceiving and understanding feelings in the heart and then expresses these feelings. You can't flip a switch and make yourself grateful. How do I open myself up to gratitude? How do I cultivate a grateful heart?

In the moments that we have left, I want to walk us through five ways or paths to a grateful heart. If you are willing to follow them, I believe that you really can cultivate a heart of gratitude.

### **1. The first of five paths to a heart of gratitude is learning to be grateful for imperfect gifts.**

This is so important. Have you ever received an imperfect gift? The fact is, in this world, that is the only kind that you ever will get.

If you are married and here with a spouse this morning, you are sitting next to an imperfect gift. Some of you might already know that. Don't get cocky about it, because the fact is you are far from perfect too.

Your body is a gift. Let's see a show of hands on this one. How many here have imperfect body? Raise your hand. Those who have perfect bodies can be dismissed.

We go through life thinking, "*If my body were only different. If I had someone else's intelligence, then I would be grateful.*" Your body may not be perfect, but it is a very good thing to have. It's a lot better than not having one. Flawed as it may be, I must learn to be grateful for my body, AND ALSO my home, my friends, my work, my mind and my life. If I wait for perfect gifts, I never will be grateful at all. I must learn to be grateful for imperfect gifts, because those are the only ones that I am going to get in this world.

There is this illusion that somehow circumstances will produce permanent gratitude. If I just have enough good things happen to me. If I just have enough money, or this or that. Paul says, learn to be content in whatever circumstances you find yourself in. Gratitude is an inside job. It starts with the heart.

*Martha Washington: The greatest part of our happiness depends on our dispositions, not our circumstances.*

When you are walking down the road, how much does it take to make you say, "*I have to go back and say thanks to someone*"? This is the first way to cultivate a grateful heart. I must learn to be thankful for imperfect gifts.

### **2. Here is the second way, and this one is a bit counterintuitive.**

#### **I must learn gratitude, and I will learn gratitude in times of anxiety and frustration.**

There is a link between anxiety and gratitude, and you will have an opportunity to learn about gratitude in times of anxiety and frustration.

Prior to April 2007 I would thank God for my health. January of 2009 I thank God for my health. Is there a difference? You better believe there's a difference. Prior to April 2007 my thankfulness was more with my mind. Today it's more from the heart. Today I am filled with great gratitude, because I experienced the anxiety of having cancer take my life.

Anxiety has this unique ability to turn your world upside down. Things that you once take for granted, you are now flooded with gratitude that you have this gift.

EX. Timothy, 6 years old son, wandered off .....15 minutes before church. Found him in the park.

In moments like that, I have conflicting emotions. Hug the kid and then you want to shake the kid.

I love this classic letter. Probably every pastor has used this as an illustration at one time or another. A girl in college wrote to her parents:

*“Dear Mom and Dad, I have so much to tell you. Because of the fire in my dorm set off by the student riots, I experienced temporary lung damage and had to go to the hospital. While I was there, I fell in love with an orderly. “We have moved in together. I dropped out of school when I found out that I was pregnant. Then he got fired because of his drinking, so we are going to move to Alaska where we might get married after the birth of the baby.” It was signed, “Your loving daughter. P.S. None of that really happened. I did flunk my chemistry class and wanted you to keep it in perspective.”*

It was a perspective deal, and a bright kid wrote that letter.

Authentic gratitude is often times learned in the midst of pain and suffering. You will learn gratitude in times of anxiety and frustration if you are open and honest during those times.

### **3. The third way of cultivating a grateful heart is by expressing gratitude often and openly.**

The third way I cultivate a heart of gratitude is when I start expressing it. You open yourself to gratitude when you express it, even if you don't feel it yet. There just is something about the way that God made us.

When we begin to express gratitude, we very often start to feel it.

The mind has to start doing before the heart begins to feel. Sincere words of gratitude have enormous

power. I have a little file in my office just consisting of notes that people send. People have written these notes to say thank you or *“I appreciate something that you have done”* or *“I am praying for you”* or *“I am for you.”*

I told Jackie, when other notes of a less complimentary tone come, don't show them to me, just put them in the circular file.

Do you know how powerful your words of thanks are to the people in your world? Maybe you need to speak those words to somebody in your life, and maybe it's to a friend.

Kids, maybe your parents need to hear a simple, Thank you.

Just for the sake of argument. Yes, your parents probably got some things wrong, but most of us have a mom and dad who got a lot of things right. They just need to hear you say thanks. Something will happen inside your heart when you say it.

Maybe it's a coach or neighbor who believed in you, breathed life into you, had dreams for you, cheered you on and comforted you when you needed that. Who is that person? Write a note to them or make a phone call.

Maybe it's somebody in this room, and you just want to go and hug them after the service is over.

Maybe it is time to do something extravagant and get a gift for somebody. I challenge you to express it openly even if you don't feel like it yet.

#### **4. The fourth way that opens your heart to gratitude is when you devote yourself to worshipping God.**

This theme of giving thanks to God runs all through the Bible. The apostle Paul said to give thanks to God at all times. The psalmist puts it like this: "*Let us enter into his gate*"—*into the presence of God—with thanksgiving in our hearts.*" What was going through your mind this morning as you parked your car, came into the building, picked up a bulletin, and sat down? Truthfully, what was at the center of your heart?

#### **Did any of these thoughts enter your mind?**

- Will the service get out on time?
- Will I like the message?
- Will the pastor keep my attention and make me smile?
- I wonder who's singing today.
- Will I be glad I came?

If that kind of thinking was present as you "prepared" for worship,

it reveals a self-centered, thankless theology that promotes complaining and stifles gratitude.

One of the main reasons why we come on Sunday morning is to do what that one leper did, which is recognize that everything we have is a gift. Each Sunday morning we are reminded of God's supreme gift.

Jesus went to the cross for me and died for my sins. He gave me the gift of eternal life.

Like that leper, we run to God, fall at his feet and praise God in a loud voice. We say, "*God, thank you.*"

If you are a committed follower of Christ, I want to ask you again, Is that the condition of your heart?

Will you make a commitment to day to have the attitude of: "*I am going to be an ATS worshipper of God.* ( And-then-Some) I am going to do that individually and be there corporately when the body gathers together to worship. I am going to run to Jesus, fall at his feet and say thank you." Are you willing to do that today?

If you can make that vow and keep it, then you will be able to say what the leper said—"Because I do that, I have come to know Jesus in a way that I never would have otherwise."

There are times when I come into this room feeling discouraged. I begin to say to myself, "*Thank you*

*for loving me and setting me free. Thank you for giving your life just for me. Thank you for the many gifts.*"

Something begins to change within my heart. I become a different person.

Others of you if you were honest with yourself would have to say,

"I am with the other nine lepers and have been up to this point"? What I have been saying is—but not in so many words—"God, really my life is OK. I have pretty much what I need, so I am going to go on ahead with my agenda. I am not going to turn this around. If I get needy, I will be in touch with you. I have other things to do with my time instead of falling at your feet in praise and thanksgiving and giving you my worship and gratitude."

If you are a follower of Christ and know God, I am going to ask you to assess your heart on this.

Ask yourself, *Am I with the one who runs to God and says thank you because he has given gift after gift to me? Or am I one of the nine who keeps walking down the road and takes it all for granted?*

If you are, then I want to ask you, is there an attitude change that needs to take place in your heart today?

### **5. The fifth way that I open myself up to a heart of gratitude is that I have to make a conscious choice to be grateful.**

You choose your attitudes!

James MacDonald writes, You can choose your attitude of gratitude as much as you can choose your diet or your underwear.

Whatever situation you find yourself in, you can choose what type of attitude to have. Those who are in an extreme difficult situation can be grateful. And those who are in the best of situations are complaining.

James MacDonald writes,

*Complaining is an attitude choice that if left unchecked will wither my capacity to experience joy and genuine thankfulness.*

*Thankfulness is the attitude that perfectly displaces my sinful tendency to complain and thereby release joy and blessing into my life.*

You make a choice everyday how you are going to approach life. You make a choice everyday what type of attitude you are going to exhibit towards other people throughout the day.

- When God opens your eyes tomorrow morning and you are again given the gift of life, what do you say?
- When you look into the face of somebody who knows and loves you and smiles at you, what do you say?
- When you eat something that tastes really good and you are so glad for the gift of taste, what do you say?
- When you tell your hand to do something and your hand does it, what do you say?
- When you read a book and your mind is able to contemplate what you are reading and think, what do you say?
- When you go to work, decide to do something and are able to do it, what do you say?
- When you look out the window and see the snow and see how it's going to replenish the underground streams, what do you say?
- When you open this book, God says to you, "I knit your body together in your mother's womb before you were aware of anything, gave you the day of your birth, numbered the days of your life and counted the hair on your head. I fed you just as I have fed little sparrows and clothed you just as I have clothed lilies in the field. What do you say?"
- When you stop for a moment and contemplate the ultimate gift that God gave you, his Son, who paid the penalty for your sins.  
What do you say?
- When you think that one day, you will live in glory. He is preparing you a place for you so that you will spend eternity with Him.  
What do you say?

Is your heart that cold and callous that you are unable to say Thank You?

When you read that God has given gift after gift after gift after gift to you, what do you say?

You have a choice today to how high you want to fly.

There is a kind of low-altitude life that too many people live. It's a particular approach that grovels and slumps and tries to get by under the radar of hope. It's a down - and - dirty, cloudy, damp, depressing, ungrateful, unthankful, complaining, negative, ugh sort of living.

But you can choose to live in high-altitude attitude - up where the air is clean and the sun is shining and the future is as bright as the promises of God. This life soars above and refuses to focus on the negatives

When I choose to practice the spirit of gratitude, my spirit rises above the grayness of life and the

**S-o-n** begins to shine through me.

Marianne Williamson:

*And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.*

Wouldn't you rather be flying in the higher altitudes than the lower altitudes? Sure you would.

Matthew Henry the famous Bible Scholar; More than 250 years ago, he wrote these words in his diary, after he was robbed of all his money he had in the world.

*Let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, let me be thankful that although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed and not I who robbed.*

Gratitude is a choice.

Let's stand for closing prayer.

### **Resources used for this Series"**

- John Ortberg: "Living With An Attitude" series
- James MacDonald, Lord, Change My Attitude
- John Maxwell, The Winning Attitude
- Louis H. Valbracht

The purpose of posting this sermon is for personal Bible study and resource material for pastors: