

“The Heaven of Gratitude”

Luke 17:11-19, 2 Timothy 2:8-15

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Agree or disagree? Heaven is gratitude.

For C. S. Lewis gratitude was the essential difference between heaven and hell. Lewis believed "that the doors of hell are locked on the inside." Heaven is the house of gratitude, Lewis declared; but "We must picture hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment." Lewis dramatized this in his novel *The Great Divorce*. In this story a tour bus arrives in hell to take the poor creatures who live in hell for a day's holiday in heaven. If they like, they may stay in heaven at the end of the day. Few wish to stay. One woman comes off the bus complaining about the rigors of the trip: complaining about her friend; she gets together with other friends and they have a complaining party, and then later she complains about them; she complains about the doctor who cared for in her final illness; she complains about the pastor of her church; she complains about the caregivers of her former care center; she complains and complains. The narrator turns to his heavenly tour guide and says: "I am troubled because this unhappy creature doesn't seem to me to be the sort of soul that ought to be in danger of damnation. She isn't wicked: she's only a dreary, pessimistic, cynical lady who has got into a habit of grumbling and complaining." The problem is she enjoys complaining more than she is capable of enjoying the joy of heaven. In heaven she would have nothing to complain about; and thus, be without her central preoccupation in life. She defines herself by what she finds wrong and complains about. She deserves better, she's quite sure of it. All of the souls of the damned feel they deserve better, as a matter of fact they feel entitled to something better. Hell is the kingdom of entitlement. "I only want my rights," says one, "I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity." "Then do. At once," his guide says, "Ask for Bleeding Charity. Everything in heaven is here for the asking and nothing can be bought." In heaven no one gets what they deserve, no one gets what they are entitled to. What heaven has to give is Joy, God's greatest gift. Joy comes as a gift to those who can receive with gratitude. If hell is the kingdom of entitlement, heaven is the Kingdom of Gratitude. What does it take for us to recognize that life is a gift, and to live with gratitude?

Our gospel lesson tells of a time when Jesus encountered 10 lepers. Steve Phifer describes their life. “They found each other these ten lepers. They drifted from garbage heap to garbage heap finding only rags to wear and scraps to eat. When the wind was right, their collective odor announced their approach and people scattered before them. When the wind blew the other way, they would often catch people unaware. Then, when their presence was discovered, people would flee before them, like a beaten army before a conquering foe and always with the cry, “Unclean! Unclean!” The sight of healthy people running in such terror from this rag-tag mob was ironic. The ten lepers had no strength; they were starving, they were dying. There was no cure, no prevention except to keep them away and pity the poor ones who had it. They were isolated to keep the others healthy. So the lepers had only each other and that was it. This was the life they lived: human refuse, a moving trash heap.”

One would expect these lepers to be complainers, bitter, fearful and angry. If you were one of them and you saw Jesus what would you say?

Luke tells of the encounter. **Luke 17:11-13 (NLT)** “**As Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem, he reached the border between Galilee and Samaria. As Jesus entered a village there, ten lepers stood at a distance, crying out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”**” Not a single complaint. Instead they show gratitude. They praise God saying, “Jesus, Master”. Master is a distinguished title. This is the only instance in scripture in which a person is inspired to declare Jesus as Master other than the disciples. They said. “Jesus, Master have mercy on us!” A lot gets lost in the English translation throughout today’s scripture reading. The idea here is gratitude springing from confident hope. The quality of mercy is glorious expectation of the future as the Kingdom of God is experienced. Something like Jesus we honor and worship you and are grateful for all the resurrection, wholeness and beauty you are bringing.

Luke continues. **Luke 17:14a** “**Jesus looked at them.**” The verb translated “looked” means saw, understood and valued. This stands in sharp contrast to how most people did not see, understand, or value the lepers for they were shunned, treated as invisible people and despised for it was common belief that disease was a result of God’s judgment against a person. Jesus fully seeing them reveals his compassion and desire to fully-heal them. Jesus saw the image of God within them. Jesus saw their gratitude. Jesus saw how they will become spectacular resurrected people.

Could it be that the lepers despite their disease, because of their gratitude to God, were experiencing heaven? Could it be that the religious leaders who were judgmental despite their status and comfortable living conditions were experiencing hell?

Luke proclaims. **Luke 17:11-19 (NLT)** “As Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem, he reached the border between Galilee and Samaria. As Jesus entered a village there, ten lepers stood at a distance, crying out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Jesus looked at them and said, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed of their leprosy. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to Jesus, shouting, “Praise God!” He fell to the ground at Jesus’ feet, thanking him for what Jesus had done. This man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, “Didn’t I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?” And Jesus said to the man, “Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you.”

Pastor Patrick Willson said. “‘Your faith has healed you.’ is a lousy translation, but there is not really a good way of translating it. What Jesus says is something like “your faith has made you whole,” “your faith has brought you salvation,” “your faith has completed what you received in your skin’s healing.” The word has to do with more than just wellness but wholeness, fullness, completeness, and blessedness. Only those who know the gift of gratitude live whole lives. Gratitude makes life complete.”

Gratitude enables one to experience more and more heaven. Even in a sermon on gratitude you notice how easy it is to complain, “that is a lousy translation,” “the translators didn’t quite get it right,” instead of gratitude for the translators work and best effort to put the best translation forward. So with gratitude to all those who worked to copy and translate scripture let us ponder the word faith. Jesus said faith has healed you. What is faith? Scripture infers that all ten had enough grateful faith to heal their leprosy. All ten had enough faith to be somewhat grateful declaring Jesus, Master and thanking Jesus for the healing Jesus was about to do for them. Is it right to say that one had more faith? Or was it a different kind of faith? Or a different step on the journey of faith? Or something else that caused him to worship God with Gratitude? What is the sequence? Does faith lead to gratitude to healing or gratitude to faith to healing or healing to gratitude to faith?

A few weeks ago I was struck by the peacemaking insert. It told of a program, RECONCILE that has helped 6,000 Sudanese women move from fear, hate, and complaining to love, peace, and gratitude. By itself that sounds nice and doable until you read about the context overcoming incredible obstacles ethnic conflicts, government corruption, child abductions, and land grabbing. I am afraid that if all my possessions and keepsakes were burned, my house taken from me, my children kidnapped, tortured and killed my response would not be love, peace, and gratitude rather rage, revenge, and bitterness. So what exactly is this faith that enables one to move from brokenness to wholeness, from fear, hate, and

complaining to love, peace, and gratitude—from hell to heaven? There must be a tremendous amount of God’s grace, God’s guidance, God’s healing in this process, in that word faith. Yet some form of faith comes from us for Jesus said. “Your faith has healed you.”

Melody Beattie said. “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. Gratitude turns what we have into enough, and more. Gratitude turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. Gratitude can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend.” C.S. Lewis wrote that gratitude can turn hell into heaven.

How does one become grateful? A popular prayer is "O Lord, make us truly grateful," When we pray, "O Lord, make us truly grateful," we acknowledge something elusive about gratitude. We recognize that we are unable to make ourselves "truly grateful." We pray for God’s help. Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful prayer.

A popular quote attributed to several people states. “Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values, your values become your destiny.” Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful thoughts.

Samuel Johnson said "Gratitude is a fruit of great cultivation; you do not find it among gross people." Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful cultivation, keeping a journal, telling others, reminding yourself of all your blessings.

Okakura Kahuso said. “When you look at your companions, try to see yourself.” A student asked. “But isn’t that an awfully selfish attitude? If we are always concerned about ourselves, we will never see the good things that others have to offer.” Okakura replied. “If only we did always see the good things in others. But the truth is that when we look at another person, we are only looking for defects. We try to discover another’s wicked side because we want him to be worse than us. We never forgive him when he hurts us because we do not believe that we would ever be forgiven. We manage to wound him with harsh words, declaring that we are telling the truth, when all we are doing is trying to hide from ourselves. We pretend that we are important so that no one else will see how fragile we are. That is why whenever you judge your brother, be aware that you are the one on trial.” Perhaps gratitude comes from a faithful humility that resists the urge to judge another.

Sometimes instead of being grateful for what we have, we greedily want something more, better, or different. It is extremely difficult to be grateful when we are making comparisons and being jealous of other possibilities. Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful appreciation for one’s unique self and circumstances.

Bullies are fearful. Fear that they are not good enough, attractive enough, talented enough; so, the bully puts another down in an attempt to elevate

themselves. Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful appreciation that one is I am a beloved, cherished child of God.

A month ago we pondered how blaming another breaks a relationship. It has been discovered that a couple who daily give each other just one grateful compliment enjoy great joy in their marriage. Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful, daily, sincere compliments.

How would politics work if each person that spoke against an issue would say one aspect that they were grateful for about that issue? What if every time someone had something negative to say about another they also said something positive about them for which they were grateful? Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful perception that sees the diamond in the rough.

The Apostle Paul wrote. **2 Timothy 2:8-15 (NLT) “Always remember that Jesus Christ, a descendant of King David, was raised from the dead. This is the Good News I preach. And because I preach this Good News, I am suffering and have been chained like a criminal. But the word of God cannot be chained. So I am willing to endure anything if it will bring salvation and eternal glory in Christ Jesus to those God has chosen. This is a trustworthy saying: If we die with Jesus, we will also live with Jesus. If we endure hardship, we will reign with Jesus. If we deny him, he will deny us. If we are unfaithful, Jesus remains faithful, for he cannot deny who he is. Remind everyone about these things, and command them in God’s presence to stop fighting over words. Such arguments are useless, and they can ruin those who hear them. Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive God’s approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.** Perhaps gratitude comes from faithful focus on the resurrection of Jesus.

As you read the Psalms have you noticed the progression? The psalms are full of raw emotions, distress, fear, hate, guilt, and jealousy. Then something happens, perhaps it is faith, then the mood shifts, the person is transformed, praise and gratitude to God emerges. The person moves from hell to heaven.

What does it take for us to recognize that life is a gift and to live with gratitude? The story is told of a wealthy father who despised grocery shopping with his healthy son. Shopping was a task that stole some of their valuable time. They argued over which food to buy. They complained about the prices even though they had plenty of money, complained about the way the store was stocked, complained about the other people, complained about the long lines, complained about the parking. One day they ran into a mother and her daughter who were enjoying shopping. They made a game out of shopping. The mother read an item on her list and the daughter raced around to find it. Once found the mother beamed a big smile and thanked her daughter. They were on a tight budget so they gave

each other a high five every time they found an item on sale. They were laughing and having a great time. Sometimes when you meet somebody going down a grocery store aisle—you meet them several times. It was the fourth aisle over, when the grumpy father realized the daughter was developmentally challenged. The mother noticed him staring. Suddenly gratitude bloomed in him and he said. “I was just admiring your relationship with your daughter.” She responded, “She is a marvelous gift from God.”

Look closely and you will see that health, money, possessions, circumstances, success has no impact on gratitude. There are people abundantly blessed without any gratitude. Conversely there are people with nothing who abound with gratitude.

Is faith a journey in which we learn to be grateful moving us from hell to heaven? Amen