

Remembering To Say Thank You To God

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As I approach this morning in preparing my own heart for our 10th Anniversary, the singular thought that I had was thanksgiving. I just kept thinking of all the blessings to the church and to me personally over the past ten years that God has given. The overwhelming feeling that I have toward the Lord on this 10th Anniversary is “Thank you.” We haven’t put together a particularly elaborate thanksgiving celebration. I think we will hold up on that until our 20th anniversary and then we can have one mammoth party together.

For those of you who like a little history, I got an account of the first Thanksgiving by the pilgrims just to see what they did to celebrate the harvest that God had given them and the fact that 55 of the 102 immigrants to our shores were still alive after a year. Listen to this account after the first Thanksgiving. This is an account written by Edward Winslow who was one of the pilgrims. He says,

“The harvest being gotten in, our governor sent 4 men fowling so that we might after a more special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as with a little help besides served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations we exercised our arms. [They held a shooting contest which, in part, was designed to show the Indians that we have big guns.] Many of the Indians coming among us and amongst the rest their great king, Massasoyt, was some 90 men who for three days we entertained and feasted. They went out and killed five deer which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor and the captain and others.”

So they had a feast for 90 Native Americans and 55 Englishmen for three full days. And we think that we know how to party hearty. The ancient people knew how to say, “thank you.” In the bible when the wall was rebuilt around Jerusalem, Nehemiah the governor appointed two large choirs to walk on top of the wall. One from one end of the wall towards the middle and the other from the other end of the wall towards the middle and their express job was to make as much noise as possible and to meet in the middle to give thanks to God. The sum of it is expressed in Nehemiah 12:43, “On that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.”

Thank you, God, for your many blessings. Thank you God for the hundreds of answers to prayer that I have gotten to see over the last ten years. Thank you for protecting the leaders and the pastors from being involved in scandal or disunity or apostasy or marital breakdown and all the other things that afflict so many groups. Thank you for answering our prayers for protection, especially over the leaders. Thank you for the many, many people who have come to know

you through the ministry of the church over the last ten years – For folks like Steve, Alison, Hank, Susan and hundreds of others. Thank you that we are going to have many more brothers and sisters in heaven. Thank you for the thousands of changed lives—for healed marriages, for broken addictions, for spiritual growth. Thank you for all the children that have been born in the last 10 years. Thank you for all the new marriages, new leaders, new ministries, new careers launched. Thank you for your faithfulness in walking with people through the valley of the shadow of death. Thank you that you have come alongside us and comforted us in the midst of the death of parents and spouses and the loss of children, friends and relatives. Thank you for the physical healings that we have had opportunity to witness over the last ten years. Thank you for the deliverances.

What I just read you was a very brief portion of my journal as I sat down to reflect on what it is that I am thankful about these past ten years in the church. Let me share a few more personal items and then we are going to look at the scripture.

Thank you, Vineyard Columbus, for being so abundantly supportive to me and to my family and to the staff here at the church and to their families. I know the whole staff, but I will speak only for Danny and me, we feel so extraordinarily supported by the church, by your prayers, by your continual notes of encouragement, the affection that you show. You may know that it is not always easy in lots of churches for pastors. Many pastors burn out and quit because they meet obstacle after obstacle and they get frustrated. But honestly, I can't imagine working with a more wonderful group of people than are in this church. You are so supportive. So quick to believe the best. So eager to serve. So lacking in a critical or cynical edge. Thank you for keeping your hearts soft. Thank you for trusting. Thank you for making it easy.

And since this is the day when we are honoring not only the church, but also Danny and me, I just want to say thank you to Danny. Thank you for being a wonderful associate and friend, and true peer on the staff. It was Danny who, two or three years ago, before I became senior pastor, came to me and tried to convince me that God had called me to lead the church. I might tell all of you that it is not the easiest job in the world to play Jonathan so someone else's David. To be a wonderful associate pastor requires that you check your ego at the door on a lot of occasions. And I will just say publicly what I have privately said to Danny on a number of occasions, that he has been a truly loyal friend. He has protected my reputation. He has served with great grace. He is, of course, awesomely gifted and compliments my own gifts wonderfully.

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 sum up my feelings on this particular occasion. The apostle Paul writes, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing."

I love that little phrase "rightly so." Paul is saying thanksgiving for you brothers and sisters is the only appropriate response. Thanksgiving on behalf you brothers and sisters is the only appropriate response. Thanksgiving on behalf of your brothers and sisters is the only right response.

On this 10th anniversary of us being a Vineyard and of my service to the church as senior pastor and Danny's as associate pastor, I want to speak about thanksgiving. And I have titled my brief message, "Remembering to Say Thank You to God." Let's just pray.

I would like you to turn to the book of Luke. Luke 17:11-19

"Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us.' When he saw them, he said, 'Go show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well.'"

Now this story can be broken up into four movements of blessing. The first movement is the beginning of blessing. It contains a description of the great need and the passionate prayer of the lepers. It says, "As Jesus was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us.'"

We see here a small leper colony. Under Old Testament law, lepers were required to live apart from the rest of society because of the fear of spreading infection. Lepers therefore were not only physically disabled and bodily grossly disfigured, but socially alienated. A person under Old Testament law, which the Samaritans to some degree followed, they were half-breeds – they did follow the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, a person would have been socially an outcast if they were a leper.

It seems to me that this acknowledgement of need and passionate cry to God is always going to be the first movement of any individual toward God and toward blessing. And it also the first thing you see in most churches, at least at their beginning. The starting point for all approaches to God is always the acknowledgement of need. No one can come to God unless they first become very clear of this one point. We need Jesus Christ. Very often we think that what is the major block of people coming to God is a cherished little sin, a relationship that they will not break, some immoral behavior that they will not repent of, a goal or ambition that they will not yield. And certainly, all of those things are blocks for people coming to Christ. But all told, all of the sins that people commit that separate them from God do not in anyway amount to the enormous wall created by one major sin, one major illusion that millions of people will not give up, and that is the sin and illusion of self-sufficiency. The reason why many people are kept from salvation, the reason why many people never step over the line toward embracing Christ is because they can't get on this road at the beginning – the simple acknowledgement of a need for God and a cry for his help and mercy. Self-sufficiency. I am basically alright as I am. I can meet my own needs. Whatever problems I have can be solved by my own savvy, grit and determination.

Now, you must understand something about acknowledging need. As I say, this is the first step in any relationship with God either as an individual or at a church level. God does not require groveling as if God is some insecure, petty tyrant like Saddam Hussein, or some medieval king in whose presence you have to bow and scrape. Here sit there on this little chair under this bright light so that I can feel more powerful and better about myself and bolster my flagging self-esteem. You must never think that God requires the acknowledgement of need just to get people to grovel in his presence. God requires the acknowledgement of need because he has so much integrity that he refuses to have a relationship on any terms other than complete honesty.

In families where addiction is a problem, truth telling is often the first victim. Let's all play pretend that dad is an alcoholic. He just has a headache this morning and we all need to be quiet. Let's play pretend that mom doesn't have a deep psychological problem with depression. The fact that she won't leave her room for days or weeks at a time is something that we ought not to talk about. Mom and all of us are doing quite fine, thank you.

The reason why God requires us to acknowledge need at the front end before we come to him, and to cry out for mercy is because God has enormous integrity and will not have any relationship except that based on the truth. And the truth, friends, is that we are broken, that all is not right with us, that there is a profound void in each one of us that only God himself can fill.

Sometimes we have gotten so good at telling lies to others that we become self-deceived about our own condition. There are unfortunately many, many people who walk around entirely bankrupt, angry, frustrated, insecure, fearful about dying, lonely, who play pretend and say, "What me? All is right with me. You will never hear from my mouth, 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. I have needs that I can't meet.'"

I love the way the British author C.S. Lewis puts it in his little chapter on pride in the great classic *Mere Christianity*. He said, "We must not think pride is something God forbids because he is offended at it, or that humility is something that he demands as due to his own dignity as if God himself was proud. He is not in the least worried about his dignity. The point is he wants you to know him. Wants to give you himself. And he and you are two things of such a kind that if you would really get into any kind of touch with him, you will in fact be humble. Delightedly humble. Feeling the infinite relief for having at once gotten rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity, which has made you restless and unhappy all your life. He is trying to make you humble in order to make this moment possible. Trying to take off a lot of silly, ugly, fancy dress in which we have all got ourselves up and are strutting about like the little idiots we are. I wish had gotten a little bit further with humility myself, if I had, I could probably tell you more about the relief, the comfort of taking the fancy dress off, getting rid of the false self with all of its 'look at me, aren't I a good boy' and all its posing and posturing. To get even near it for a moment is like a drink of cold water to a man in a desert."

He wants us to be like the lepers and cry out for mercy because he demands truth in our relationship. And the truth is we are like the lepers. He wants us to

be authentic because it is so relieving to us to be real. To finally take off the false mask, the pretend face, the I-have-it-all-together posing, to come out and say I really need help. I really need Christ.

Of course, it is not enough to acknowledge need. We must cry out. There are a lot of people who are painfully aware of their shortcomings, but who take their shortcomings and either become self-pitying or self-condemned. Woe is me; I am such a loser. And even worse, Woe is me and therefore God must hate me.

The story of Jesus healing lepers is designed to communicate that no matter how disfigured you are morally, emotionally – no matter how ugly your soul may appear, Jesus Christ loves you and he wants to rescue and restore you.

Now, this first movement of acknowledging need and crying out for mercy is always found in churches that are experiencing blessing. You will always see that at some point in the church's history that the general cry of the church was O God, we are a needy people. We are dry. We are sinful. We have no power. We can't get the job done. We are not seeing anyone saved. We can't heal anyone. We can't do anything. O God, come and visit us.

Now I think it is interesting that it doesn't take a lot to get Jesus' attention – not a lot of theology, not a lengthy prayer meeting, not a lengthy bargaining session or negotiating session, as if Jesus was the executive of some large company and we were working for a labor union. The prayer is very simple. Jesus, Master, have pity on us. They are exhibiting all the faith that is required to elicit a response from Christ. They see that Jesus has the goods. They call him Jesus, which means Savior. They call him Master recognizing his authority. And they know the only issue is whether he will choose to, in this case, be merciful or not. It doesn't take a lot to elicit a response from Jesus. Just recognize who he is. He is by nature a rescuer. His name means Savior. He is by nature a rescuer. Now that is not a good thing for people to be, but it is who Jesus is. Jesus can not be asked for help without desiring to help because that is who he is. And he is also the Master, the Lord of every circumstance and every situation.

Okay, movement two, the journey or the walking out of the blessing – a quick response and immediate obedience. Verse 14, "When he saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were cleansed." The Lord is never slow in answering prayer. He answers the moment we pray, always. Never imagine that God is in heaven with his arms folded saying to you, "Well, you haven't met the requisite number of requests – 742 times asking the same thing before I will respond. You haven't been fervent enough, emotional enough in your prayers. You haven't whipped yourself into a frenzy or believed hard enough that I would do what I promised to do. And so I am going to sit on my throne impassive until you push this enormous rock of prayer all the way up the hill. And then I will let it roll down on the other side of its own accord."

Our incredible Lord immediately answers every prayer. I didn't say he immediately answers "yes" to every prayer. Like a good parent, sometimes the Lord says "no" to requests that will hurt us. Sometimes he says "no" because he has something better for us even though we think we know what is best for us.

We know this job is absolutely going to bless us and we get rejected. We know this relationship is the one that will ultimately fulfill us and our fiancée or boyfriend or girlfriend breaks up with us. We know this move to a new house or city is going to bring us happiness and our plans fall through. Sometimes God says “no” to our prayers because he loves us too much to say “yes”.

And sometimes God says “not now.” What you want is a good thing, but it is not what I am working on in your life right now. Now is not the time for you to have a mate or for you to receive this healing, or for you to enter this ministry. Not yet, but it will come. It is just that I am working on something else in your life right now.

All I am saying, friends, is that God always responds to our prayers quickly even when his quick responses are no, or not yet. And God requires that we immediately obey him even when he says no or not yet. Your obedience, my obedience my never be conditioned on the particular response from God to one of our prayers.

You know, so many people walk away from the full blessing of God because the Lord has not said to them what they want to hear. What I wanted to hear, Lord, was ‘You got the job.’ What I wanted to hear, Lord, was ‘You are going to have a husband or a wife.’ What I wanted to hear, Lord, was ‘My husband, my parent, my friend says yes to the offer of the gospel.’ But since I didn’t hear what I wanted, I am walking away.

Now, in this particular case, Jesus stretches these men’s faith out. He sends them to the priests. And some of you may know that it was the priests who were to check for healing, to discern healing in Leviticus 13. He sends them to the one who is going to discern healing before the healing takes place. He sends them on the journey before he gives them the provision.

Friends, it takes great faith to step out in obedience to Jesus, in obedience to his word to you, before you see how everything is going to line up. My friend, Gary Best, describes the Christian life as Jesus calling us to jump off of a high dive into a big pool with Jesus saying to us, “Oh, and by the way, I will fill the pool on the way down.” John Wimber describes the Christian life as being a plumber going out to a job with an empty tool box all the time and coming to the job, reaching into the bag and just as you need the wrench it is put in your hand. That is really the way blessing comes. In obedience to the commands of Jesus, we put our hands on the sick and we pray for their healing even though in the moment we don’t feel full of faith and in the moment they don’t seem full of faith either.

Blessing comes when you obey Jesus and share the gospel even though you don’t feel particularly spiritual and even though you are afraid of rejection, and even though it is not convenient. And blessing comes. You obey Jesus and go back to a failing marriage even though your feelings are not there for your mate and then provision comes.

I will tell you, friends, churches that have been blessed and individuals who have been blessed have learned the secret of obedience before blessing. Virtually all of us want it in the other direction. We want blessing first. We want the provision first. We want the bank account full and we want to go to the bank

and count the money ourselves before we put ourselves on the line to obey the word of Jesus Christ. But that is not the way blessing works in the bible. We get the word. We enter the journey, the risk of faith, and along the way the Lord provides.

Now over and over again in the last ten years the Lord has required us to show ourselves to the priests for healing before the healing came. He required it in everything as little at the beginning as just starting a second service. I remember how scary it was the first year of being senior pastor and standing before the church and saying, "I believe the Lord has spoken to me. He is growing to grow the church, but he is only going to do it if we are willing to start another service. And I know the people aren't here yet, but they will come if we make room."

Some people said, "You are going to split the church."

Some people said, "This will destroy our unity."

A few people said, "No one will go to that other service."

But most of the church said, "Okay, we will trust." And provision came.

The many, many people who have been reconciled in their marriages followed this exact prescription. I hear the word of the Lord to me. Do not get divorced. Before I see, before I feel, I am going to obey. Provision came.

The many, many people who have been freed up from addictions struggled internally with powerful feelings of temptation. They heard the lure and the cry of the particular substance they were drawn to or the particular object. And they said, "no, I am going to obey" and then blessing came by way of freedom, fulfillment and change.

The way this building was built – we stretched ourselves out. It was the last hour. Banks around town kept saying, "No no no, we won't loan you any money." It came down to the very last weekend. I remember some of us getting together in intercessory prayer and calling out to God. People around the church were praying, "Lord, we need your help." A bank manager would not get together with me even though I tried to work it on my own. He would not meet with me. We were forced to rely on the provision of God. And so we prayed on Friday. The bank manager was going to have this meeting on Monday to make his recommendation to the board. Things looked bleak. The loan officer said, "There is no way this is going to happen." On Sunday morning the bank manager was at home with a sick child. He happened to turn on the Robert Schueler program. The bank manager is sitting there and as the loan officer reported to me, the bank manager's major problem in giving us a loan was that he just thought to himself, "Vineyard, what's Vineyard? What kind of church name is that? It is not like Presbyterian. I am not going to loan a bunch of guys named Vineyard a million dollars no matter what their financial statements look like."

He is sitting there watching Robert Schueler with his sick daughter. Robert Schueler gets on TV and says, "This morning I want to share with you a testimony of God's faithfulness to me. I was dying in Holland and a man from Vineyard came. A dear man named John Wimber and he prayed for me. And this man from Vineyard was used to heal me and raise me up."

The next day the bank manager went to the bank and said, "Vineyard is a nationally respected organization." He pushed through the loan.

Very often the Lord requires responses before provision.

Here is movement three: the cutting off of blessing. "One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'"

The cutting off of blessing occurs in a church's life or in an individual's life when they forget to return thanks. It is often easier to pray than to praise. It is often easier to ask than to thank. Many of us are quicker to request help than to respond well once help comes. The reason why many churches and many individuals do not enter into full blessing is because they forget to complete the circle after requesting and risking toward responding in gratitude.

Let me put it even more starkly than this. The apostle Paul says that the very center of a decadent declining culture is ingratitude. In Romans 1 the apostle Paul says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him." The heart and center of a culture in decline is that people forget to say thank you. They forget to send little notes of appreciation thanking a friend or a relative or a fellow church member or a leader for a gift, for a kindness. They forget to make calls of appreciation to recognize what someone else has done for them. They forget to say thank you to a spouse for love and support or to friends for encouragement. But mostly they forget to say thank you to God.

Now there are lots of reasons why people don't return thanks to the Lord. Many people just want the gifts instead of a relationship with the giver. I never really was interested in the relationship with you, Jesus Christ. I just wanted to get married. Now that I am, see ya! I never really was interested in a relationship with you, Jesus Christ. I just wanted to get up from this hospital bed. And now that I have gotten up, see ya!

I never really was interested in a relationship with you, Jesus Christ. I just wanted a job. And now that I have one, see ya!

Some people are ungrateful because they never really wanted a heart connection with Jesus. They just wanted relief from their problems. Help in their pain. They were willing to take from Jesus' hand, but they never looked into his face.

Some people are ungrateful because they are thoughtless. They simply take no time on the many blessings that have been given them by others or by the Lord. No time for reflection. No time for acknowledgement. We have it, now on to another blessing.

But you know, the thing that makes me frightened in myself and, God forbid it should show up in the church, is ungratefulness that springs from a growing sense of entitlement. We start off on our knees like the lepers, "Have mercy on us, Lord Jesus." We stretch ourselves out. We know the truth and the truth is that we are helpless and hopeless without him. He meets our need. We are rescued. Our marriages get better. Our bodies get healed. Our church grows.

Then, after a period of time of experiencing blessing, we begin to think, “Well, blessing is the normal state of affairs. This is the way, after all, it ought to be.” And even worse, “We are only receiving our due.” God forbid that with the rising tide of blessing we also have a rising sense of entitlement – numerous converts and bigger facilities and better and better services, but of course, after all, we are The Vineyard. I can hardly say that without wanting to spit.

But friends, that potential is there for the blessing to be cut off, unless we close the circle by remembering frequently to say thank you to God, we can become like a child in a very wealthy home who begins to believe that golf lessons and horseback riding lessons and art lessons and designer clothes are just part of what is due him or her life – an inflated sense of entitlement rather than an awesome sense of gratitude.

Full blessing comes when we as the Samaritan return thanks to the Lord. It says in verse 19, “Then he said to them, ‘Rise and go, your faith has made you well.’”

In this man’s particular case, he moved from the healing of his body to receiving the healing of his soul. The other nine men received extended health and life on this earth, but the thankful man was the only one who received eternal life.

Did you know that thankfulness in the bible is communicated to us as a cure for many things? If you struggle with cursing or just unclean speech where a lot of curse words tend to come out of your mouth, the bible says that the cure for that is to start allowing thanksgiving to come out of your mouth. Ephesians 5:4 says, “Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

Giving thanks is a cure for complaining. If you are a complainer, if you tend to express cynical or complaining comments, Ephesians 5:20 says, “Always give thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of Jesus Christ.”

But ultimately, friends, thanksgiving puts us on an upward spiral because it brings us back to the beginning again where we come to the Lord and we say, “I am still a leper apart from your healing. My flesh is still the same as always. If you were for a moment to withdraw your hand of support and grace, I would fall like a stone.” Thanksgiving reminds us of the debt we owe to grace.

Like the hymn writer says,
Hither to Thy love has blest me;
Thou hast bro’t me to this place;
And I know Thy hand will bring me
Safely home by Thy good grace.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Bought me with His precious blood.
Oh to grace, how great a debtor
Daily I am constrained to be.
Take my heart and with a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to thee.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.