

In one of Charles Schultz's Peanuts comic strips, Lucy is shown knocking on Charlie Brown's door. When he answers, she asks him for help with her math homework. Then she says to him "*if you help me, I'll be ETERNALLY GRATEFUL.*" Charlie Brown replies, saying "*I've never had anyone be eternally grateful before.*" So he lets Lucy in, and helps her with her homework. The last question is one of those math sentences where she has to figure out how many apples are left. So Charlie Brown reads the question and says "*that's easy. Subtract the four apples from the ten apples, and you get how many apples the farmer has left.*"

"*That's it?*" Lucy asks. "*That's it.*" Charlie Brown says. "*I have to be eternally grateful for that?*" Lucy wails, "*I can't be eternally grateful for such a simple answer*" "*So what do you think is fair?*" Charlie Brown asks. "*How about if I just say thanks?*" Lucy says. Charlie Brown then goes outside to meet Linus. "*Where have you been?*" Linus asks. "*Helping Lucy with her homework,*" Charlie Brown replies. "*Did she appreciate it?*" Linus asks. "*At greatly reduced prices,*" Charlie Brown replies.

I am sure that everyone here tonight has encountered situations where someone should have been grateful for what was happening in their life, but wasn't. Once in awhile, that someone may have been us. For even though it may be our intention to be grateful for the blessings showered upon us by God, we may have discovered that the temptation to be ungrateful (or at the very least grateful "*at greatly reduced prices*") is forever swirling around us, and - in fact - buried deep in our soul. Fortunately, God has told us how to combat ungratefulness. Let's look at a few of those combat methods.

TO BE GRATEFUL WE MUST BE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND OTHERS. We see this in the passage from Luke. Nine of the lepers were Jews, but one was a Samaritan. It is easy to miss that little fact when we read this story, or at least fail to understand why Luke made a point of recording it. Jews and Samaritans did not associate with one another. That is because one side of Samaritan ancestry was made up of the remnant of the Jewish people left behind when the bulk of the nation was taken off into exile. The other side was made up of the Gentile people the Babylonians brought in to settle the vacated land. This means that the Samaritans were half-Jewish/half-Gentile, something that was a violation of the Law.

As a result, every time a Jew encountered a Samaritan, they were reminded that their ancestors had been sent into exile because they too had not obeyed the Law. That reminder angered them. The Samaritans, like many of those who feel oppressed, returned the hatred by disdaining the Jews (who they believed thought themselves to be superior). Since there were 9 Jewish lepers and 1 Samaritan leper living together in this "*region between Samaria and Galilee,*" it may have been a "no man's land" in which both the Jewish and Samaritan communities had dumped them. For the chasm that existed between these 10 lepers as Jews and Samaritans paled in comparison to the canyon that leprosy had created between them and their own communities.

This is because in a pre-scientific and pre-medical world, the only way they knew to prevent leprosy from spreading was to ban those with such a condition from the community. They were therefore

sent away to an isolated place where they couldn't be in contact with others. That isolation is not therefore an incidental note in the story. It is an important part of the story for us to hear, for we too are often isolated - from God, and from other people - just as the Samaritan leper was isolated not only from his own people, but also from the other lepers with whom he had been dumped. Thus, when we look at this story, it is helpful for us to resonate with how isolated that Samaritan leper must have felt, for we often fail to recognize just how estranged we can be from God and others.

We see our isolation, and how it can lead to ingratitude, in the story of a woman waiting for a plane at an airport. Knowing it would be a long flight, she stopped at a snack machine in the terminal and bought a bag of cookies. Then she found a seat where she could read her newspaper and eat her cookies. A minute later, she became aware of a rustling noise. Peering around her paper, she saw a man sitting two seats over, eating a cookie. Then she looked down on the seat next to her to see her open bag of cookies. This man was helping himself to HER cookies! Not wanting to make a scene, she quietly reached down and took a cookie. A few moments later, she heard more rustling. The bum was helping himself to another cookie! This went on until there was only one cookie left. As if to add insult to injury, the man broke the last cookie in two, pushed half across the seat to her, ate the other half, and smiled. Then, he got up and left.

For the next hour, the woman fumed. When her plane arrived, she got up and went to the gate. As she reached into her purse for her ticket, her hand hit something unexpected. It was her unopened pack of cookies, right where she had stuffed them back at the snack machine. The cookies she had been eating were apparently not hers after all, but belonged to the man sitting next to her. And he had apparently been graciously allowing her to pilfer HIS afternoon snack, not the other way around. Similar things can occur in our lives when we allow ourselves to be isolated from God and others.

TO BE GRATEFUL WE MUST NOT UNDERESTIMATE GOD. As Jesus came near the lepers, they yelled "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*" While we may assume they wanted to be healed (since they were later healed), the text does not say this is what they were asking for when they spoke. In the ancient world, the phrase "have mercy" was used in various ways. Whenever it was used, however, it literally meant just what it says: for someone to "have mercy" in some way. Often, the person making such a request would specify how they would like mercy to be expressed. Have mercy: give me food. Have mercy: give me money. Have mercy: tell my family to help me. To get a handle on that, think of the way we might hear someone on the street ask "*can you spare a dollar?*" But when people do that, they are not looking for just a dollar. They'd rather get a hundred dollar bill. It's just that "*can you spare a hundred bucks?*" seems a bit much to ask.

And yet, while the lepers may not have been specifically asking for healing, Luke tells us that Jesus decided to give them much more than they were requesting. For while they might have been underestimating who HE was, Jesus did not underestimate His Heavenly Father. We see this in the fact that Jesus tells them to go to the priest. For according to the Law, their isolation in a leper colony could only be lifted if the priest declared that they were healed. And so, Luke says, "*as they went, they were cleansed.*" They asked for one thing, Luke says, and Jesus offered them something greater. For it was Jesus' intention not just to give them alms, or compassion, but to heal them of

their leprosy because He did not underestimate what our Heavenly Father can do when we trust Him. The same thing can occur in our lives when WE do not underestimate the ways God is willing to “have mercy” upon us.

We see this in the story of young boy named Chad. One day Chad came home from school and told his mother that he wanted to make a Valentine for everyone in his class. At that news, his mother’s heart sank. *“I wish he wouldn’t do that,”* she thought to herself. Through the years, she had watched the children get off the bus each day. Chad was always lagging behind them. The other children laughed and played together, but their awareness of Chad fluctuated between being oblivious to him and picking on him. But Chad insisted, so she offered to help. For the next several weeks, Chad and his mom made Valentines each night after school. On the day of the party, Chad’s mother decided to bake his favorite cookies. Warm cookies and cold milk, she surmised, might take the sting out of being ignored. She knew he would be disappointed. He might not get a single Valentine, she thought to herself.

At the end of the day, she heard the children noisily walking home. As usual, Chad brought up the rear. He walked a little faster than usual, however. His heart is broken, she thought. He just can’t wait to get into the safety of his own home. *“I have warm cookies and cold milk!”* she said as cheerfully as she could as he walked in. But he hardly heard her. He just marched past her. But as he passed, she notices that he had a big smile on his face. *“Not a single one,”* she heard him say, *“not a single one. . .”* *“I didn’t forget a single one.”* Chad’s mother never did find out if he got any Valentines that day; all she knew was that he was happy about not having forgotten a single one of the other kids. Similar things happen in our lives when we do not underestimate what God can do.

THE FINAL WAY TO BE GRATEFUL IS TO PUT GOD FIRST. The world around us constantly tempts us to place jobs, family, hobbies, and other temporal pursuits ahead of God. The sin inside us tempts us to settle for the temporal enjoyments of this world. In response, our fallen and sinful nature can cause us to excuse the fact that we haven’t always obeyed Jesus’ call to *“pick up your cross, and follow Me”* as fully as we could have, and become angry with those who point that fact out to us. We see this in the story of a three year old boy who was saved from drowning by his six year old sister. The boy had fallen into a pool. His sister jumped in and held his head out of the water until help arrived. When interviewed later by the local news station, the girl was asked if her brother was grateful for her being saved. *“Oh no!”* she said, *“He’s mad as the dickens at me!”* *“Why?”* the reporter asked. *“Well,”* the girl said, *“The only way I could keep his head out of the water was to hold it up by the hair. He’s still mad because it hurt so much!”*

When we do not put God first, a similar thing can happen in our spiritual lives, leading us to be ungrateful for the fact that God (despite the pain of some of the things He needs to do to save us) is indeed going about the process of saving us. This is because while God offers us salvation, receiving it in fullness requires that we follow the paths God would have us trod - and that means giving up at least some of the earthly pursuits we might be focused on instead in our fallen and sinful state. We see this in the scriptures before us tonight.

Psalm 136 calls us to “*give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His love endures forever,*” for only God’s love endures forever. Psalm 95 reminds us that only God is the “*rock of our salvation,*” and the One who is our “*Maker,*” for we have not created ourselves, nor do we have the power to keep ourselves safe from harm. And Psalm 100 declares that His love for us “*endures forever*” and His “*faithfulness [is] to all generations,*” for only God knows what each of us needs, no matter our age or station in life.

This is why at the end of the passage in Luke, we are told that Jesus said to the Samaritan leper “*your faith has made you well.*” For it is only when we have faith that God is able to do great things IN and FOR us that we can gratefully thank Him not only for all He has already done in our lives, all he is currently doing, and also all He is yet to do. We see this in the song we will sing to close this service: “*You are not alone if you are lonely. When you feel afraid, you’re not the only. We are all the same, in need of mercy; to be forgiven and be free. It’s all you’ve got to lean on but thank God it’s all you need. And all the people said ‘Amen.’ And all the people said ‘Amen.’ Give thanks to the Lord for His love never ends. And all the people said ‘Amen.’*”

Let us then this night, strive to be grateful for all that God has done, is doing, and will do for us, by striving to be in relationship with God and others, by not underestimating God, and by putting God first in everything we do. And all God’s people said . . . AMEN