

Proper Praise and Thanksgiving

We just finished praising God for all the great reversals He's performed in His earthly ministry as well as all the great reversals He continues to work on us with His life-giving Word and Sacraments. Praise the One who breaks the darkness. Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow, right? Makes perfect sense. As we turn our attention to the Gospel lesson, we hear that the Samaritan leper, upon recognizing the fact that he'd been completely healed of his leprosy, took the time to return to Jesus, fall on his face, and praise God with a loud voice. Now, there's a ton of good theology just in the fact that this guy praised **God** by praising Jesus. This guy—this Samaritan—recognized God in the person of Jesus. ***Praising Jesus is praising God... in the flesh.*** Think about that. Think about the effect that this Divine great reversal has on this man. He returns—***unafraid and full of joy***—into the very presence of Almighty God in order to fall on his face in thanksgiving and praise God.

What about the other nine? I don't doubt that they were thankful too. ***Wouldn't you be?*** Talk about a great reversal. Having been healed of their leprosy and declared "clean" by the priests (according the Levitical Law), they could now return to "the land of the living." They were no longer ostracized or forsaken; abandoned to the outskirts of humanity. They were no longer sentenced to be "outside looking in." The Lord Jesus, by His grace, worked a miracle of great reversal that went far beyond simple medical healing. It was, in a very real sense, ***a resurrection unto new life.*** They were given a second chance at life. How many of you would like a second-chance? How many of you would like some "do-overs"? These guys were getting all that... and more. But... in all their excitement and haste, they forgot to return thanks and praise to the One who made it all happen. They cried out to Jesus for mercy (from a distance), and He drew near to them and gave them the gift of grace. He gave them all that they didn't deserve. ***Doesn't that deserve a little praise and thanksgiving?*** You can't take five extra minutes out of your day and thank/praise God for the gift of new life you're being given? Your Lord thought so. ***"Where are the other nine? They were healed too. Only the Samaritan turns back?"***

Now, here's the thing: We get all this. It's not hard to understand. My question for you: Do you offer up thanks and praise to God in ***all*** circumstances? I will confess to you that I don't. Like the lepers in our Gospel lesson, my conversations with Christ often sound more like pathetic complaints than simple petitions of thanks and praise. ***It's very easy to render thanks and praise for the things going our way.*** However, when the "going gets tough," the concept of actually ***praising*** God tends to get more and ***more distant*** from our minds as the "going" gets tougher and tougher. It's very easy to forget about all that we have,

and instead get hung up on what we've lost or don't have. It's far easier to **blame God** in these difficult circumstances than it is to offer Him thanks and praise.

This leads to another question: Why? ***Why should we give thanks and praise to the Lord, especially when the chips aren't falling in our favor?***

Consider these words from Psalm 100: "*Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, and His steadfast love endures forever.*" Notice that we are **not** told to give thanks unto the Lord **only because He has really hooked us up**. How many of you are thankful for "everything" God has given you, but you know that you could be **more** thankful if you didn't have those bills coming in, or those aches and pains, or the fear and uncertainty of not knowing how your plans/desires are going to shake out? ***If God only gave you tomorrow what you were thankful for today, would that change how you prayed? Should it?*** Is that why you praise God: So He'll scratch your back by giving you all kinds of good stuff?

We understand what it means to praise God for all that we have. That's a "no-brainer." We even understand what it means to give thanks to God ***for all that we don't have***, i.e. "bad" things such as terrible sickness, homelessness, bankruptcy, violence, etc. We give thanks that God spares us from these terrible tragedies (and rightly so). We give thanks for those absences in our lives, ***but we need to be careful in doing so***. Such "praise" can be a real slippery slope into sin. Remember: A certain Pharisee thanked and praised God for the absences in his life too, giving thanks that he wasn't like the tax collector. ***But what about those other absences?*** What about those things we **really do want** and ask for ***and don't receive?*** Have you ever praised God after He clearly says "no" to you? I have never heard anyone give thanks for **not** winning the lottery. I've never heard anyone praise God for the "gift" of diminishing health. "*Thank you, God, for my cancer!*" I don't think those words have ever been spoken (and understandably so). How many of you have praised God when the great reversals you're looking for didn't happen?

Why do we thank and praise God? ***Because He is good, and His steadfast love and mercy endures forever.*** We offer up our thanks and praise to God simply because He has seen fit to ***bless us with blessings beyond all measure***. Don't believe me? Ask one of our more "seasoned" members here today what a ***blessing*** it is to simply wake up and stand on their own two feet! Of course, this is still only looking at reasons to give thanks from a **worldly or material standpoint**. "*I have my health, so I will thank the Lord.*" ***What if you didn't have your health? What if you were at death's door and only inching closer? Do you still have reason to fall on your face and praise God?***

Our Lord's love and mercy endures forever. It is eternal. Have you ever thought about what that means? Look to this cross. Here is where God Himself

declared victoriously, “*It is finished, once and for all.*” Here is all the reason in the world to praise and thank God, always and in every circumstance. Here is your great reversal from death to life. It doesn’t matter how bad things may be or how much worse they may get. This cruciform fact is always and will remain eternally true. Your God and Lord willingly gave up His life on a cross, suffering an *eternity’s worth of sin and sorrow* for the entire world, all so that you could be truly “made well” and have the *absolutely free gift* of eternal life with Him in Heaven.

Look to this font. Here is where He brought this life-giving, death-reversing victory to you. Here is where He called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. You are no longer exiled from God in the deadliness of sin. He has drawn near to you and made you His own. In His eternal and limitless love, He has called you and made you His own, *in spite of* all that you are (not *because* of who or what you are). This isn’t a one-time deal either! We all sin, don’t we? We all stray. Does this mean that God no longer loves us? Do we have to do something *really big* so as to “win Him back?” No! In His steadfast love and eternal mercy, He is always there holding out His loving arms, welcoming us back. We ARE baptized (ever-present tense).

Look to this altar. Look to this communion rail. Here, again, is your merciful, gracious Lord drawing near to you, kneeling down from Heaven in order to nourish you with His gracious medicine of immortality and peace that is His Body and Blood. The guilt, the shame, the sin... all gone. Just think about what’s going on here. The Lord of Heaven and earth comes to you, *in spite of you and for you*. Here He is, with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven... right here, for YOU! My friends: If that’s not reason enough to take a little time on Sunday morning—a *mere one hour out of 168 hours that make up one week*—and return, unafraid and full of joy, to simply say “thank you” to your Lord and Savior for all that you have and all that you are—all free and unmerited gifts from Him—then I don’t know what else to say. “*What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me? I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the Lord.*” This is what the faithful Samaritan leper was all about. I pray this is what you’re all about too.

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good... and yet He still willingly suffered our *justly deserved death and punishment for us*. That is truly GOOD. Because of Jesus Christ, we can truly render thanks and praise to God this day, and every day, because His steadfast love and eternal mercy for us *endures forever.*

In His name and to His glory... **AMEN.**