

Have you ever tried to teach a child to say, “thank you” when receiving a gift? It takes determination, doesn’t it—the reason being, from the time we are small, we tend to focus on the gift. If you’ve ever given a child a gift, you know there are a variety of reactions you may get. A child might open a present and say, with transparent honesty, “I hate this.” Or maybe you’ve seen a child unwrap something, look at it blankly, and set it aside in order to search for something more to their liking. In either case, a “thank you” is probably not forthcoming. But, what if you hit the right combination and the gift is something delightful to the child? Chances are, once they’ve received it, they race off with it to put it to immediate use. They’re enraptured and they can’t wait to play. If you’re lucky, you may get an over-the-shoulder ‘thank you’ which doesn’t exactly translate into a meaningful expression of gratitude. This isn’t to say that children are horrible—they’re just more candid than adults. The truth is, grown-ups can be just as bad at “thank you’s” and just as fixated on the gifts.

Jesus found this out when he healed the ten lepers in today’s gospel from the seventeenth chapter of Luke. He was quite literally pushing the boundary by traveling the border between clean Galilee and unclean Samaria. This is a very Jesus-y thing to do—to go where quote-unquote good people shouldn’t for the sake of changing lives. And there couldn’t be much bigger of a change than the one these lepers experienced. Their skin disease made them socially unaccepted. They were cast out of home and occupation, forced to merely exist on the outskirts of town. The conventional religious wisdom of the day would’ve held that they must have done something to deserve this fate—that they were getting their come-uppance for some sinful behavior, therefore shunning them was completely justified. And here comes Jesus, who doesn’t shun or shy away, and who, with a few words, removes this curse from their bodies. This is not less than a physical healing but it is far more, because it means that once this miracle has been verified by a priest, they get their old lives back. They get to become family members again. They get to work again and be a full participant in the community and no one will look down their noses at them anymore. Pure gift. Jesus was the giver of this gift and don’t you wonder what he thought? Only one person—and that person from the wrong side of the tracks, no less—returned to say thank you. One praised God and bowed at Jesus’ feet. Ten percent of the group.

By the way, this Gospel lesson has become a staple of most Thanksgiving services you will ever go to, and you can see why. Nine of the healed lepers were like kids who got the one thing on their wish list that they wanted most. They rush off to enjoy what they have been given. One returns to say “thank you.” Don’t forget to say “thank you,” seems to be the theme. And on Thanksgiving Eve you go home and the next day, enjoy your turkey and football and get ready to go shopping. And it works. But let’s dig just a little deeper today. It might get uncomfortable for a minute, but I promise it will be worth it.

Now sure, this is a reminder to say thank you, but why? Why would you not just take this gift and run with it? I mean, God wanted these people to be healed and have their lives restored to them, why not go enjoy it? And as far as our lives go, what’s the value in

thankfulness? We know where the good stuff comes from, right? I might take credit for some things once in a while, and that's my bad, but why go through this thanking and praising, all the time? Because, thankfulness is a barometer of your love for God. Thankfulness is a way of measuring the intensity of your desire for relationship with Him. And there it is. There's the 'why.' There is a Giver behind all our gifts who wants us to notice him. The Giver of all our gifts would love nothing more than for us to look up and see his face, to see the smile of love that he has for us, to wonder what makes him tick. He wants a relationship with you. That's why he's giving the gifts.

This incident of one returning to say 'thank you' to Jesus enables me to ask this question: do you primarily go to God to get things—or to get Him? Do you seek his hand which holds something that you want—or do you seek His face, just to know him better? Do you get it? One is a transaction. ("What do I have to do to get what I want?") The other is a relationship. ("I want to know this God better and why he is so gracious and generous.") I told you this was going to get uncomfortable. But again, the majority of the time, why do you knock on God's door—to get stuff or to get Him? The gifts, or the Giver?

Do you realize that every single gift that God has ever given you, right down to the last, little, most random-seeming, chance happening, was meant to catch your heart and grab your attention, and get you thinking about Him? All of it, every bit of it, has been a love letter to you. He gives to you to draw you in, in hopes that you will come to love him just for himself. So, do you? Can you say to God, "I love you for who you are, not for what you give me?"

Imagine you've just gotten married recently and your young spouse says, "Honey, why do you love me? Why did you marry me?" And you say, "Well, first of all, there are a couple major business relationships I got into through you. A couple incredible deals happened because of doors you opened for me. And, I did some research, and you have a very wealthy uncle who loves you and has no children! And, he's old and sick." "Wait a minute! You don't love me; you just love what I give you."

The one healed man who came back to Jesus loved what he had been given, but he wanted to know the Giver more. And he knew enough to adore Jesus, he fell at his feet. That's an act of worship. This is the relationship with the potential to reshape your heart. When a love for God—just for who He is in Jesus—takes over your heart, it replaces the things you're trying to get acceptance from.

But how do you get there? It only happens if you experience God's love as grace. Undeserved love. Unexpected love. After all I've done wrong; after all my chasing after things; after all the hurt I have caused, why are you still with me? Why are you still blessing me? Why do you still love me, Father, in spite of my sin? We have the resource to answer that question.

We have a God, in Jesus, who, when He showed up in the world, did not hesitate to go to the unclean places to find the unclean people in order to make them clean. He made the lepers whole; he made the blind see; the lame walk; the silent mouths shout; the deaf hearing, the demon possessed free and in their right mind and look at how he did it. It wasn't 'abra-cadabra' and wave the wand and 'poof,' you're all better.

Jesus came in and took all of the sickness into himself. He absorbed it. And he carried it, all the darkness, all this disease, to the cross. Jesus put this massive burden of sin on his shoulder and treated it like it was His own and it died with Him on the cross that day, just outside Jerusalem. So, God the Father holds nothing against you. How could he? His Son paid for it all.

Don't you want to know the one who would do that for you? If you have any gratitude in your heart for that; that is what's going to make God not just useful to you but beautiful. That's what is going to make you go to Jesus just to get Jesus. That's what's going to make your stewardship of his gifts a joyful act of praise. Let's fall at Jesus' feet today, saying, "Thank you Lord for what you've done, but I love you just for who you are." The Giver is the greatest gift of all.