

The Essential Prayers sermon series  
Thanks!  
September 14, 2025  
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

I was working with a particularly ornery youth group one time while I was in seminary. This group of mostly middle school boys was rambunctious and not really very good at taking directions. We were doing some painting in our youth room and they weren't quite as focused on the task as I thought they should be, so I was quickly losing patience with their shenanigans. When one of the boys brusquely asked for a paint tray, I handed it to him and waited for his response. When it didn't come, I said, "Um, Blake, don't you have something to say to me?" "Like what?" he said. I said, "When someone gives you something, you're supposed to say the magic words." And he replied, "Abracadabra!" And I said, "You know, that's Greek for 'I'm a jerk', right?"

While that might indeed be a magic word, it's not the one I was waiting for. And as fun as it is to say, it doesn't make Anne Lamott's list of the three essential prayers. In her latest book, Lamott makes the case that the three prayers we need to pray most are "Help," "Thanks," and "Wow." Last week we learned the importance of praying for help. This week, we'll talk about why we need to pray our gratitude to God.

Our Bible story today is a perfect illustration of the power and necessity of this prayer. Luke tells us Jesus is traveling between Samaria and Galilee. That's the border between two groups of people - the Jews from Galilee and the Samaritans from Samaria - who really don't like each other. The Samaritan race came about when a group of Jews violated God's law by interrelating with a group of Gentiles. Because of this, Jews considered Samaritans to be ethnic and religious half-breeds who perverted the pure race of Jews, like the muggles in Harry Potter books. For Jesus to be walking the borderlands between them was like walking the fence line that separated two warring nations. To call someone a Samaritan in those days was a racial slur, almost as bad as calling them a Tennessee fan.

As Jesus is approaching a village, he is met by ten people who had leprosy. Leprosy was believed to be a disease not just of the skin but of the soul. It was often considered to be a punishment from God, and it was an especially tragic disease because it was so obvious for everyone to see. You can hide a stomach virus or sinus infection; you can't hide leprosy. These factors meant that people with leprosy were exiled from society. If they wanted to get someone's attention to ask for a handout, they had to shout from a distance, so as not to contaminate the person.

That's what these ten people with leprosy do when they see Jesus. They don't ask to be healed; the idea of being cured was beyond their wildest dreams. They're not asking Jesus for a life change; they just want his spare change. The title the people with leprosy use, "Master," was a common way at the time to show respect, and their request to "have mercy on us" was simply a way of begging for money. They weren't expecting a miracle.

But that's what they get. Jesus commands them to go show themselves to the priest, an action that would be necessary to do before they could be considered clean and fit to return to society. On the way, they are healed. One of the ten turns back, praising God in a loud voice, throwing himself at Jesus' feet and offering thanks. Then Luke drops the bomb – and he was a Samaritan. Really? The only one who does the right thing is a leprous Samaritan? That can't be

true. I mean, you know what Samaritans are like. Why would one of those people be the hero of the story and return to give thanks?

But Jesus had a better question: why didn't the other nine do the same? Like the Samaritan, their illness had been taken away, their health had been restored, their lives had been changed. Why didn't they stop and take the time to give thanks? It's easy for us to criticize the nine for their lack of gratitude. But considering the circumstances, they may have had legitimate reasons. Maybe they were so excited to be healed that they forgot, or maybe they were scared of Jesus and his power, or maybe they rushed off to hug their family for the first time in years, or maybe they were so jaded they'd stopped saying "Thank you" a long time ago. In our own lives, we can usually come up with at least nine different reasons why we don't stop and say, "Thank you."

But one did. One saw beyond all those reasons and realized that the only proper response to the miraculous work of God was to return to Jesus. He praised God with a loud voice, he threw himself at his feet, and he thanked him. The Greek word for "thanks," used four times in this passage, is, "Eucharisto." It's the same word from which we get the more high falutin' name for what we do at this table. What we call communion, some churches call the Eucharist. Singing God's praises, placing ourselves in Jesus' presence, giving thanks through words and offering. As Martin Luther said, "Worship is the tenth leper turning back."

Have you ever thought of worship that way? Not as something routine you do on Sunday morning, not as a place to catch up with friends or check off a spiritual to-do box, but as a time to express your thanks to God for all God has done for you this past week. How does your view of this time in the week change if you equate it to the tenth person turning back? I don't think this was quiet, hushed praise from this man, either. The guy didn't sneak up to Jesus and whisper in his ear, "By the way, thanks!" He came running and shouting, making such commotion that everyone around him stopped to see what was going on. True worship is meant to disrupt our monotony as we give our thanks to God.

Gratitude is a spiritual discipline, and not an easy one to practice in a world where too often we assume we have an absolute right to health, happiness, and all our creature comforts. It's easy for us to believe that we deserve what we have, and we only realize the preciousness of our blessings when they are removed. Too often we get so caught up in our blessings that we forget to acknowledge the Blessor. I think it's ironic that the less you have, the more you appreciate it, and the more you have, the harder it is to say thanks.

To be fair, there are times when it's not OK to be thankful for the situations we are in. We are told to look on the bright side or find the silver lining, but that's not always realistic. In fact, that can come across as dismissive of the real emotions a person is experiencing in the midst of a difficult situation. There's a reason I preached on the prayer "Help!" before the prayer "Thanks." Sometimes, we need to pray "Help!" in order to be able to pray "Thanks."

But most of the time, there's a reason to say "Thank you," and we may have to think like those much different than us in order to understand how thankful we should be. In our story, it took an outsider, a person with leprosy, a Samaritan, to be thankful in such an excessive way, because the last thing he was expecting was to be made well. On the other hand, we church folk can become so used to following a pattern of faith – come to church, be nice to others, lend a hand, give some money – that we either can become blinded to the awesomeness of our blessings or we can begin to think that we are entitled to them. Our jobs, our health, our family, or possessions. Sometimes we simply need to step back from our lives, look around and let the joy and gratitude and praise gush forth. Ask yourself this: Does the sincerity and frequency of your thanks to God come close to matching the ways in which you are blessed? Is expression of thanks a form of worship or an afterthought?

We learn from the tenth person that the only response to our blessings is to be a blessing, to turn back to Christ and give thanks. Are we required to do this? No. The other nine didn't. Does Christ need our thanks? Of course not. But we need to be thankful, because developing and nurturing a spirit of gratitude makes for a richer and fuller and more peaceful life. What would it mean for us to not complain about all the traffic and instead give thanks for having transportation? Or to pause in the long line at the grocery to give thanks for the abundance of food we have. Or to take a moment while paying a medical bill for the skill of the doctors and nurses who care for us. We have been blessed beyond measure, most fully in the gift of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, a meaningful goal for all of us is to try and live a life that is a constant "Thank you." Ann Lamott says, "Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into our behavior." We sing a song of thanks every week called the Doxology - "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" - but beyond these walls we are called to be a living doxology to God. Do the words you speak and the choices you make and the way you treat others say "Thank you" to God? LaMott writes, "Thanks is a huge mind-shift from thinking God wants our happy chatter and a public demonstration and is deeply interested in our opinions of the people we hate, to feeling quiet gratitude, humbly and amazingly, without shame at having been so blessed."

An amazing thing happened when the tenth person returned. Jesus sees his spirit of gratitude, his gushing praise, and says, "Rise and go, your faith has made you well." Jesus doesn't mean "well" in a physical sense; that's already happened. Luke actually uses two different Greek words here for "cleansed" and "made well." Jesus means that this man's soul has been made whole. On that day, ten were cleansed, but only one was made well, healed of his anger and resentment as well as his leprosy. Giving thanks has that kind of power, the power to make us whole. If we're not feeling whole, if we're feeling like something's missing, if we are letting anger or fear get the best of us, what would change if we found something for which to be thankful and focused on that instead?

When the tenth gave thanks for his blessing of healing, he was blessed with wholeness, as well. What blessings are in store for us and for this church when we take time to say, "Thank you?" What are you taking for granted today? Don't wait until you've taken care of all your other business to give thanks. Come to God first, let your life become a living doxology, let your presence become a constant "Thank you" to God. Today would be a great day to turn back.