

“One Turned Back”

Scientific research is showing us that being thankful can have amazing positive effects on our life! In preparing for this message, I googled “Scientific research on the positive effects of being thankful.” I was blown away with the massive amount of scientific evidence showing the positive effects that gratitude has on our mental, emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual wellbeing! For instance:

Brain chemistry – gratitude actually changes our brain chemistry! Gratitude can change neural structures in the brain, making individuals feel happier and more content.

Gratitude can reduce depression – a review of 70 studies that include responses from more than 26,000 people found an association between higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of depression.

Heart health - gratitude also supports heart health. Several studies show that a grateful mindset in a positive way affects biomarkers associated with the risk for heart disease. Having grateful thoughts also helps your heart by slowing and regulating your breathing to synchronize with your heartbeat.

Better sleep - studies have shown that gratitude can activate the hypothalamus, which regulates bodily mechanisms that control sleep.

Reduces pain – gratitude may reduce feelings of pain by regulating dopamine levels. Grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and report feeling healthier than other people, according to a 2012 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences*.

And there’s more! Being thankful reduces stress. It improves mental strength and resiliency. For years, research has shown gratitude not only reduces stress, but it may also play a major role in overcoming trauma. It can help lower high blood pressure. It helps strengthen our immune system, thus decreasing the risk of disease. Being thankful improves our mood. It improves self-esteem and can boost self-confidence.

In the social arena, being a thankful person opens the door to more relationships, and healthier relationships. Gratitude reduces aggressive feelings, and enhances our ability to empathize with people. Grateful people are more likely to behave in a prosocial manner, even when others behave less kindly, according to a 2012 study by the University of Kentucky.

All of the above benefits are based on clinical research! Turn to Luke, chapter 17. Verse 11 says this: “On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem – for the final time – to die on a cross. Ten lepers approach him: “As he entered a village, ten men with leprosy approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’” (Luke 17:12-13).

Leprosy (Hansen’s Disease) was a common, dreaded disease in the time of Jesus, much like polio was in the 1950’s, and like cancer is today. There are 3 kinds of leprosy. Depending on

which kind you have, it can produce discolored blotches, ulcerated, oozing nodules on the body. A person's nerve trunks can be affected. Fingers and toes – even hands and feet – can waste away and eventually drop off. A person's face often becomes disfigured until it loses its human appearance, and almost takes the shape of a lion's face.

Besides the physical pain and suffering and humiliation, lepers had to endure being ostracized from family, homes, livelihoods and the community. Lepers were herded together at the boundaries of villages, and forced to beg in order to survive. They were barred from the temple and synagogue, thought to be ritually unclean. Leviticus 13:45-46 tells us: "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean'. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone, his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

Ten of these poor souls approach Jesus. They know enough to keep their distance. And they begin to yell, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" How does Jesus respond? "Go, and show yourselves to the priests" (Luke 17:14). In order for a leper to re-enter the community and normal activities, he or she had to be pronounced healed or ritually clean by a priest.

"Go, show yourselves to the priests," Jesus says. And they do! And as they start to walk away, strange and wonderful things begin to happen! There's a tingling in their gnarled fingers and toes, and they begin to straighten. Their faces grow warm, eyebrows start to grow back, facial muscles begin to form the gentle shape of a human face again. Ulcerated vocal chords that made them talk in hoarse, raspy tones become whole, and their speech is normal once more.

They are healed! Hope begins to get hold of them! They can be with their families again! Return to their jobs! Be welcomed in the synagogues once more. Jesus is giving them back their lives! Luke continues the story: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan" (verses 15-16). Did you notice the last short sentence? "And he was a Samaritan." An outcast. A hated, despised half-breed. Yet, in his sheer delight he shouts out praises to God. He falls at Jesus' feet and says, "Thank you!"

But wait a minute! Where were the others? "Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?'" (verses 17-18).

Isn't it incredible that out of 10 lepers who were healed, who were given a new lease on life, only one bothers to thank Jesus! Reading this story always kind of pokes at me: I'd like to think *I'm that one who certainly would take time to be thankful!* But I'm not so sure!

It's easy to grow so accustomed to all the blessings we have, that we lack a grateful heart. Most of us living in the U.S. have so much, that it's easy to begin to think we're *entitled* to this! You know the TV cartoon show, *The Simpsons*. It reflects an irreverent, sometimes bawdy secular approach to life. In one episode, the dad asks Bart to give thanks as they sit down to a

meal. Bart prays, “Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.”

Let’s just suppose we have hardly any income, we’ve used up whatever life’s saving and assets we have, we’re not even sure where the next meal is coming from. Guess what? That would be no different from the way millions and millions of people in the world live. People who may work just as hard as we do, (or even harder), but lack the necessities of life.

The Bible says God’s people are to be a thankful people. “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 107:1).

Being thankful has little to do with how much or how little we have. It is more a matter of our *attitude and perspective*. There’s an old Jewish story. A man goes to his rabbi and complains, “Life is unbearable. There are 9 of us living in one room. What can I do?” The rabbi answers, “Take your goat into the room with you.” The man resists, but the rabbi insists, “Do as I say and come back in one week.” A week later the man is back, looking more distraught: “We can’t stand it; the goat is filthy. The rabbi tells him, “Go home, and leave the goat out. Then come back in one week.” A radiant man returns to the rabbi one week later: “Life is beautiful! We enjoy every minute of it now that there’s no goat, and only 9 of us!” *Gratitude is a matter of attitude!*

A *Peanuts* cartoon pictures Charlie Brown bringing out Snoopy’s dinner on Thanksgiving Day. But it’s just the usual dog food in a bowl. Snoopy takes one look at the dog food and says, “This isn’t fair. The rest of the world is eating turkey with all the trimmings, and all I get is dog food. Because I’m a dog, all I get is dog food.” He stand there and stares a while at his dog food, but then he says, “I guess it could be worse. I could be a turkey.” *Gratitude is a matter of attitude!*

Illust. This piece was circulating on the internet a few years back: “Thank you Lord for all your blessings!!! I am thankful...

For the wife who says it’s hot dogs tonight, because she’s home with me, and not out with someone else;

For the husband who’s on the sofa being a couch potato, because he’s home with me and not out at the bars;

For my sizeable heating bill, because it means I am warm;

For the taxes that I pay, because it means I am employed;

For the clothes that fit a little too snug, because it means I have enough to eat;

For the mess to clean up after a party, because it means I’m surrounded with friends;

For the lady behind me in church who sings off key, because it means I can hear;

For the alarm that goes off early in the morning hours, because it means I am alive!”

Gratitude is a matter of attitude!

Jack Hinton, from New Bern, NC, was leading worship at a leper colony on the island of Tobago. There was time for one more song, so he asked if anyone had a request. A woman who had been facing away from him turned around. Hinton said, “It was the most hideous face I’ve ever seen.

The woman's nose and ears were entirely gone. The disease had destroyed her lips as well. She lifted a fingerless hand in the air and asked, "Can we sing Count Your Blessings"? Overcome with emotion, Jack Hinton left the service. He was followed by another team member who said, "Jack, I guess you'll never be able to sing that song again." Hinton replied, "Yes I will, but I'll never sing it the same way again."

One of the lepers whom Jesus healed turned back, gave praise to God, and thanked Jesus. Nine of them did not. The last part of this story has a strange twist to it. Jesus turned to this one man who gave thanks – the *Samaritan* – someone whom Jews would imagine to be obnoxious and ungrateful. Jesus says to him, "Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19). Wait a minute! Weren't all 10 of them healed? Does this mean that, maybe, the other 9 got "un-healed" as a result of their ingratitude? Scripture doesn't say. Here's a possibility. Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well" (NRSV translation). Some translations have it, "Your faith has *saved* you" (it's the Greek word *sodzo*, or "saved"). Maybe this man was not just *physically* healed, but he found *salvation* that day! He discovered the forgiveness and new quality of life that Jesus offers! Living with an attitude of gratitude is closely tied to being saved and being spiritually healthy!

I began this message by referring to research that has shown a connection between good mental and emotional health, and living with gratitude. A man named William Stidger was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Once a very energetic, dynamic person, he was not just a shell of his old self. A friend suggested that the way for him to avoid further breakdown and to be healed was by the therapy of thanksgiving, and by practice of what is called "the attitude of gratitude." His friend invited Stidger to sit down and make a list of all the people who had helped him through the years. Then he was to fill his mind with thankfulness for all these people and what they had done. His friend asked if he had ever thanked any of them. "No," he said, "I never really put much stress on that."

Next, his friend advised him to think of someone who especially had blessed his life and write that person a letter thanking him or her. Mr. Stidger thought of a school teacher, who was now a very old lady. Stidger sat down and wrote the teacher a letter, telling her that he remembered the inspiration she had given him, how he never had forgotten her across all these years, and how much he loved her. A few days later he received a letter written with a trembling hand. Using his boyhood name, it said, "Dear Willie: When I think back over all the children I have taught in my lifetime, you are the only one who ever wrote to thank me for what I did as a teacher. You have made me so happy. I have read your letter through my tears. I have it by my bedside and I read it every night. I shall cherish your letter until the day I die."

This did so much for him that he thought of someone else to write to, and then someone else, and before he was through, he had written 500 letters of thanks! The therapy of thanksgiving had much to do with helping him regain mental and emotional health. Gradually he became grateful for every new day, and began to live life to the fullest.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 sums up all of this pretty well: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

