

# Thank You Note

“Make it better.”

Luke 17:11-19

Fourth in the Series, *Ups and Downs on the Emotional Roller Coaster*

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## Obligation Avoidance

There is a large tent pitched in the back yard and balloons tied to the tree out in front. School colors, so when you drive up you'll know that this is the house where the graduate lives, in case you don't know already. Little children hang on the front door and people stand in the driveway, leaning against cars that are all graffitied-up with the same colors as the balloons: *Freedom! Go Seniors! Class of 2010 rocks!*

Moving in through the driveway and into the backyard, you know you're in the right place when you see large trash barrels lined with 30 gallon plastic bags, already filling with paper plates and plastic cups, and the coolers filled with bottled water and soft drinks; hear the sounds of some school musical from the past playing on the TV inside; and see a table with a Costco frosted cake and a pile of gifts.

Graduation party.

And everyone is drawn to the graduate to tell them, “Good going. You finally made it!”

And the baked beans and pasta and dozens of other dishes – hot and cold – are waiting in the garage on the long tables, to fill the plates and be taken to the tent where you'll settle in.

But oh, the presents that are stacked on the table! And to think for each one of them, a THANK YOU NOTE is required!

Don't you know I understand about having to write the dreaded thank you notes! When I was little and just in my early years of school I had to write them. I had a great-aunt who was an English teacher at River Rouge High School. She was either famed or

notorious, I don't know which. She would send me a package for Christmas every year. I might hope for a toy or some trinket I could show off to friends; but knew I wouldn't even have to unwrap it – I knew what it would hold. Every year, without fail, it would be a package of Fruit of the Loom underwear.

For this I had to write a letter of thanks. *Dear Auntie, thank you for the underwear...* and every year, after the painstaking task was completed, the letter I wrote was certain to come back in return mail – marked all over with the school teacher's red ink of corrections. Then I had to make the corrections and rewrite the letter and send her the perfected copy. You think this year's graduates have it tough!

I understand. All those gifts: dictionaries and pillows and cologne and clocks from everyone who watched them grow up from when they were only this big. All of these gifts for which appreciation must be shown: at the time of life when there are surely better things to do. Every parent knows that getting their graduating children to write these things is just like pulling teeth.

### **Gratitude**

Better things to do. That's what nine out of ten healed lepers had on their minds.

All ten of them happened to cross paths with Jesus, who was on his way to Jerusalem. At their point of life, it didn't matter who they were, what family they came from, whether they were Jewish or Gentile or Samaritan, or how wealthy they had been; the disease that rotted their skin had reduced all of them to the lowest status there could be. Public health codes demanded that they keep a distance from everyone else. In pain, weak, and rejected: they approached Jesus with caution, calling for help.

And Jesus changed everything. He told them all to go show themselves to the priests. And as they went, they realized that they were healed. They had done nothing but ask. They hadn't paid a fee and they didn't promise to send in a donation. They hadn't bargained to get it; and they didn't even promise that they would do something kind for someone else. They simply came as beggars and then left the scene as the most gifted people of all. Cleanness and wholeness was theirs for the taking.

Nine out of ten simply took it.

Like it was some kind of entitlement or something: “It’s about time this happened!” Nice gift, but who has time to write a thank you note?

They just continued on their way as though nothing much happened; and for them probably nothing of permanence resulted. Sure, they were healed – until the next time they became injured or ill. After two thousand years, the nine stand as people who were given an incredible gift and yet received nothing. They experienced something very nice and kind that Jesus did; but outside of that and the show it made of God’s unconditional love for the rest of us, *it made no difference*. The way they saw the world or lived their lives didn’t apparently shift as a result of this new health they got.

All it seems they had was a new lease on an old life.

It seems their hearts were left unchanged. So, if their lives would good for nothing more than they had been before, where could you see God’s glory? Where would you see the Kingdom of God break forth and take root in their lives? Nowhere. It was their choice; and it’s evident that they chose poorly if they were even aware that there was a choice to be made.

I guess that’s what nine out of ten will do.

Yet there is this one out of ten that came back to Jesus. Even though in his former life, when disease hadn’t yet brought him to his knees, he had been a lowly Samaritan – not even a Jew. If you were there at the time and if you were Jewish you might have thought that God’s grace had just been wasted: like Jesus didn’t realize that the blessing was going to someone who wasn’t supposed to get it.

He wasn’t entitled to this!

It was this no-count Samaritan who was the one-in-ten that returned, praising God in a loud voice, giving thanks with a grateful heart so that Jesus asked, “Are you the only one for whom this has made a difference? Where are the other nine?”

You see, it was in this lowly nobody that the Kingdom of God broke forth when Jesus gave the gift. His heart was changed: the one person with the follow-through to let it make a difference.

He wrote his thank you note – not out of duty or because his parents told him he was grounded until he did. He turned and he loved this One who had given the unconditional gift that changed his life. This was also a choice. He chose well.

Because he was grateful, his new lease was on a new life.

I still have a few gifts I got when I graduated from high school. Like, somewhere in a box someplace I'm pretty certain I still have a half-bottle of cologne I got from my parents' friends, the French's. I also remember them, some of the advice they gave and the love and care they expressed when we were together.

I have this dictionary that was given to me by the Bowen's. Mr. Bowen had been one of my father's life-long friends and lived in Kalamazoo. He owned a furniture store; and I always remember how intelligent he seemed. The dictionary was an appropriate gift – they always wanted to encourage me in my schooling and the working of my mind. You can tell that I've used this a lot through the years in school and ever since.

And I have this picture of me just after I received my diploma and was walking off the platform and back to my seat. I didn't even know it was taken until this older man from the neighborhood who was a regular in the drug store where I worked gave it to me. I can't remember his name, but I do remember that he always bought R. G. Dun cigars and was one of those customers who took an interest in us high school kids. One day right after graduation he came in and just gave me the picture he decided to take just because he had cared.

Now, I remember him.

When I stop and remember the gifts and what they meant and who it was that gave them to me, I also realize the significance of what I have been given. And I remember what my parents gave me, the lessons my teachers taught, even sometimes when they were off-subject.

I realize life has been filled with blessing: mostly undeserved and often unconditional. And I'm glad I took the time to write the thank you notes, forced as I was to do it.

And I'm glad I took the time to write the thank you notes.

Shock of all shocks: I realize that writing them wasn't just about letting people know they were appreciated. Writing them was also so the gifts could become something deeper for me – they'd always be more important than a bottle of cologne, a dictionary, a photo, and *even the underwear*.

So I thank Jesus: for his gift of salvation and unconditional love. I remember that no matter where I am or what I've done: there is this gift of God's embrace. Like the leper, like the Samaritan, I haven't really earned any of this. But he gives it. He gives his life.

### **Making It Better**

So, graduates: *write your thank you notes!* Not because I said to and not because your parents will ground you until you do. But because taking the time to look at them one-by-one and thinking about who gave them will let you know how much you'll always be loved. That's something you can keep.

And think also of Jesus, who has given you the gift of life and salvation. And go back to him praising God again and again. That's how you'll always realize what a treasure you've got.