

“HOW MUCH WILL IT TAKE?”
Deuteronomy 8:7-18, 2 Corinthians 9:6-13, Luke 17:11-19
November 21-22, 2020
Thanksgiving Sunday

I want to start today by giving you some statistics that might astound you. Maybe not. I did a little research the other day about the wealth and affluence of the United States, and the results came about like this.

“**Affluence** refers to an individual's or household's economic and financial advantage in comparison to others. It may be assessed through either **income** or **wealth**.

“Affluence is a very widespread phenomenon in the United States, with over 30% of households having an income exceeding \$100,000 per year and over 30% of households having a net worth exceeding \$250,000, as of 2019.

“While income is often seen as a type of wealth in colloquial language use, wealth and income are two substantially different measures of economic prosperity. Wealth is the total number of net possessions of an individual or household, while income is the total inflow of wealth over a given time period.

“In the United States, as of 2019, the median household income, that is the middle income of all the people of the U.S., is \$60,030 per year and the median household net worth, meaning the middle total value of a family in the U.S., is \$97,300. That differs from the average income and net worth. The mean, or average, household income of everyone in the U.S. is \$89,930 per year and the mean (average) household net worth of all families in the U.S. is \$692,100.”¹ I know these statistics can be a bit confusing, but bear with me if you would.

I start out with these statistics because we need to see how truly affluent we are here in the United States. And when we begin to see how affluent we are, we can then begin to compare the affluence we have with the corresponding thankfulness that comes with that affluence. Sadly, however,

¹ (Wikipedia, *Affluence in the United States*, 2019 numbers)

the two do not relate well with each other, since the more affluent a person becomes, typically the less likely they are to be thankful for their abundance. Those with great affluence often take that abundance for granted, and rather than give God thanks for all that they have, they look more to what they don't have and grumble about the fact that they don't have more.

And that is the danger lifted up to us in our Old Testament lesson of Deuteronomy 8 today. God was preparing to provide the people of Israel with great abundance, giving them the land that He had promised, filled with "*wheat and barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and honey. There you will never go hungry or ever be in need,*" Moses tells the people of Israel. "*Its rocks have iron in them, and from its hills you can mine copper. You will have all you want to eat, and you will give thanks to the Lord your God for the fertile land that he has given you* (Deut. 8:8-10)."

God wanted to bless His people with all that they needed because He loved them and desired the best for them. Having brought them out of slavery in Egypt, where they owned nothing, were forced to endure tremendously difficult working conditions, and had to live on the meager food supply that they were given by the Egyptians, God now wanted the people to have all they needed, and all that they wanted. There was nothing too good for His people.

However, God knew the hearts of the people, so He instructs Moses to tell the people the tremendous warning, "*Make certain that you do not forget the Lord your God; do not fail to obey any of His laws that I am giving you. When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in and when your cattle and sheep, your silver and gold, and all your other possessions have increased, be sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves* (Deut. 8:11-14).

You see, that's the tendency for all of us – the more we have, the less thankful we are. And we see that in our nation today, where we have politicians telling us that we are in the worst shape as a nation that we've been in for a long time. Yet, we are better off today than we have been at any point in history! Remember the average and median income levels? The United States contains almost 30% of

the world's wealth, yet we have less than 10% of the population. Yes, there are some who have much less than others and can barely squeak a living out. Yes, there are some who have huge stockpiles of wealth. The question is however, "Are we thankful for what we have? Do we appreciate the great abundance that God has provided for us at whatever level of economic prosperity we find ourselves in? Do we give God thanks for all that He has granted to us?"

Generally speaking, most Americans have such little thankfulness for what they have because we think we have done it all by ourselves, by our own power, in our own wisdom, and through our own creativity and ingenuity. We are the 9th most prosperous nation in the world.

Yet again comes the warning in Deuteronomy 8. *"So then, you must never think that you have made yourselves wealthy by your own power and strength. Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to become rich. He does this because He is still faithful today to the covenant that He made with your ancestors (8:17-18).* God is the One Who has given us the ability to earn a living. He is the One Who has provided us with the intelligence to do our work, and it is God Who has granted us the strength to do mighty accomplishments. Without the Lord's blessing in our lives, we are unable to do much of anything. So when we step back and realize that all that we have is from the Lord our God, because He has given us the ability to work and gain wealth, one would think that we would begin to find ourselves more thankful for what He has done to supply us with all we have. However, thankfulness comes as we realize Who it is that has made it possible for us to do what we can do and the recognition that it is way beyond our own abilities and skills that brings us affluence. God is the One Who blesses us.

Yes, God desires to bless us abundantly, but not just for ourselves, but rather to show His glory in the way that we live and the way that we give. The Apostle Paul wrote to the people in Corinth to help us all understand that God expects us to use His blessings to bring about a good result in our lives. God first gives us the ability to work and then blesses us so that we might use those blessings to keep those blessings going. And thankfulness has to be a part of the equation.

Here's how it works - A person may receive great abundance and think only of themselves, which brings about no great result to glorify God. What benefit does it do for us to have great wealth and affluence if we do not use it to glorify God through thankful work? Thankfulness for the blessings that God has given to us begins to open up our eyes to see the needs of others around us who are not as blessed as we are, and provides us the chance to share the blessings that God has given to us with those who are in need. And God blesses us so that we might put those blessings to work so that we might bring more glory to God in the process. All that we have is from the Lord God, so He expects us to do something good with what He has entrusted us with.

So here in 2 Corinthians 9, Paul explains the purpose of God's blessing of abundance in our lives. He says, *"And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause. As the Scripture says, 'He gives generously to the needy; His kindness lasts forever.' And God, who supplies seed for the sower and bread to eat, will also supply you with all the seed you need and will make it grow and produce a rich harvest from your generosity. He will always make you rich enough to be generous at all times, so that many will thank God for your gifts which they receive... (9:8-11)."*

God delights to bless us, and not just for ourselves, but for touching the lives of those around us. As we give thanks to God for all that He has given to us, we bring greater honor and glory to God as we use those blessings to share with others and allow them to delight in God's blessings, too. And when God sees that we are using His blessing of abundance to do great work for Him, He keeps blessing us so that we never run out of His abundance, but rather we have all that we need to keep on blessing those around us. Thankfulness in what God has blessed us with generates the desire to give to others so that they might also experience the abundance of the Lord.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, our generosity demonstrates our faith. As we touch the lives of others in the sharing of our abundance given to us from the Lord God, our faith in Jesus is confirmed and we find God blesses us even more. God delights to bless us abundantly as we use those blessings to

be a blessing to others. So Paul explains, *“And because of the proof which this service of yours brings, many will give glory to God for your loyalty to the gospel of Christ, which you profess, and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else. And so with deep affection they will pray for you because of the extraordinary grace God has shown you. Let us thank God for His priceless gift!”*

Think about how this world would be different if everyone gave thanks to God for all that they have. How would it change your life? Consider the home you live in; the vehicles you drive; the job(s) you have; the health you enjoy; the possessions you have; the family that is yours to enjoy; the area of the country that you live in; the clean fresh air you can breathe; the clean fresh water that you can drink. And think about the infrastructures that you have available to you that we always take for granted (garbage pick-up, street cleaning, leaf collection, solid roads, electricity, internet and TV, protections from danger by the police and fire departments, and medical services to name a few). And what about our technology that we enjoy every day? We have gotten so used to them being a part of our life that we take them for granted and dismiss them as blessings. But just visit another country, say Mexico for example, and you will see quickly how tremendously blessed we are here in Sheboygan, in Wisconsin, in the United States of America.

You see, all it takes is for us to lose a few of these conveniences, and we quickly come to realize the enormity of our blessings from God. What happens when the lights go out in your house because of a disruption of the electricity? What happens when floodwaters wash out roads or bridges? What do we do when storms knock down trees, or blow apart our houses? Do we give thanks for the abundance that God has given to us then? No, we grieve the loss of those things, and many times get angry at the disturbance of our comforts and conveniences. Our thankfulness is nowhere near the point that it needs to be. How many of you praise God when the gas prices at the pump gets down below \$2.00 per gallon? See what I mean – we take it for granted.

But when the bottom drops out of our life, when everything begins to fall apart around us, we begin to see the tremendous blessings that we had, and the lack of thankfulness that we gave back to

God for His supplying us with all our needs, plus much, much more.

Today's Gospel lesson exposes where many of our hearts are today. Listen to this encounter that Jesus had with ten men who were at the bottom of life's ladder. We don't know what their status was before this encounter with Jesus, but we do see a surprising result. Listen to Luke 17:11-19. (READ Luke 17:11-19)

Ten men had somehow contracted leprosy, a very destructive and dreaded skin disease. In Jesus' day getting leprosy was like receiving a death sentence. People with leprosy were banished from their community, they were relegated to living with others with leprosy, and they were completely dependent upon the generosity of family or friends to supply them with food and clothing. Those with leprosy were at the complete bottom of human existence. They literally were the scum of the earth. And sadly they were judged harshly for that disease, as the thought was that they were being punished by God because of something they did. They had nothing to look forward to, nothing in their possession, nothing to live for, and no real hope of a cure outside of God's grace of healing. For the rest of their life they had only memories of the blessings that God had supplied them with before their disease. How could thankfulness even be considered when they found themselves at that extreme level of despair?

And if healing was to take place, the infected person had to present themselves to the priests in the Temple, where they were closely examined before being pronounced clean. Only then, could these folks have any hope of returning to their families, their communities, and their occupations. What joy it would be to literally be lifted up from the dust of the earth and restored to the life they were used to living in?

So Jesus brings healing to these 10 men because they called out to Him. They must have recognized Jesus as He traveled along the road to Jerusalem. They must have heard something about Him in order to consider putting their hope in Him to bring a cure for their disease. Somehow they realize that their only hope for restoration was to be healed by Jesus. Yet, being banished from all other "normal" people, how would they come to know about Jesus? We don't know. But wouldn't it be

interesting if one of the ten had heard about Jesus before he got leprosy? Wouldn't it be curious if one had listened to Jesus' teachings, had witnessed some of His miraculous healings, or had participated in other work that Jesus had done prior to becoming infected with leprosy? Wouldn't it have been interesting if this one had become so convinced that Jesus was truly able to bring healing to him, that he put his complete trust in Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, AND THEN began telling those who were just as hopelessly lost as he was about the hope that he had in Jesus being able to cure him? And then, gathering a few others around him, he leads them to the road where Jesus was sure to go as He made His way to Jerusalem, with the hope and assurance that Jesus would do something for them. This desperately lost, desperately sick, desperately expelled individual, convinces others to seek Jesus in order to find restoration and wholeness once more. What an extreme example of evangelism that would have been, for ones who were lost and then found in their faith in Jesus would bring others to Jesus in that same faith and hope so that He could make them brand new creatures through the power of God in Him?

Anyway, Jesus recognizes their desperate need, and instead of being repelled from them, commanded them to go to the priests at the Temple to be proclaimed cured. That was it – no touch was involved; no great feat of healing; no ointments or salves or magic words. Just the command to go to the one place where they could be proclaimed healed. AND THEY TRUSTED JESUS ENOUGH TO GO! They took Jesus at His word, trusted in His command, and went off toward the Temple. And as they went on their way, they discovered that they were healed! Feeling came back into their hands and feet! Diseased skin fell off in huge clumps! Damaged and distorted limbs became normal again, and everything became new! WOW! What a dramatic difference, just because they trusted Jesus and followed His command!

But here's the sad part – only one of them returned back to Jesus to give thanks to Him for curing him. We would think that with all of that desperation, with all of that despair, with all of that hardship eliminated, there would have been 10 men rejoicing and giving thanks to God for what He had

done. But only one returned to give thanks to Jesus. Only one praised God with his whole heart and sought out Jesus once more to publicly thank Him for His kindness, His compassion, and His healing given to him. And that man was a foreigner, not a part of the favored people of God. Only the Gentile returned thanks to Jesus for the priceless gift of healing and restoration.

Jesus was amazed at the lack of response. His words show His disappointment, *“There were ten men who were healed; where are the other nine? Why is this foreigner the only one who came back to give thanks to God? (Luke 17:17-18)”*

So I ask you today, how much will it take for us to start giving thanks to the Lord for all that He has given to us? What extremes must we go through to begin to give God our gratitude for the abundance of blessings in our life? Let me finish today with one more illustration.

“A party of pioneers on the Oregon Trail suffered for weeks from a scarcity of water and grass for their animals. Most of the wagons had broken down, causing endless delays in the stifling heat. A feeling of fretfulness and futility prevailed. Optimism and cheer were gone. Courage was in limited supply. One night the leaders called a meeting to air complaints. When they gathered around the campfire, one man stood up and said, "Before we commence our grief session, don't you think we should at least first thank God that he has brought us this far with no loss of life, with no serious trouble from the Indians, and that we have enough strength left to finish our journey?"

“The other settlers agreed. After the brief prayer, all that could be heard were the cries of a distant pack of wolves. There was otherwise stone silence around the campfire, because no one had any grievances they felt were important enough to voice. They suddenly realized if they couldn't be satisfied with what they'd received, they could at least be thankful for what they'd escaped. Thankfulness enabled them to see the mercies of God they had been overlooking.”

We, too, have much to be thankful for. We have been blessed tremendously by God, and as we practice thankfulness, we come to see how we can be a blessing to those around us, to the glory of God.

Father, help us to be thankful for all Your blessings, in Jesus' Name we pray. AMEN.