

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

I am greeted often these days with the question, “How are you doing?” Maybe it’s just my new ears, or maybe it’s partly you, but the query seems to come with a new dimension of earnest caring. As a matter of fact, it goes both ways. I really want to know how you are doing too.

Anyway, I am having an astounding and wonderful time. I’m almost afraid to say how good I feel because I know how irritating that can be to someone who may be in a hard place at the moment. But for myself, the best word I can think of is “renewal.” Everything I have known in the past seems to be circling back with new clarity. On the inside, it feels like old logjams are starting to break up, and the stream of life is starting to flow again. And it doesn’t seem like I am doing any of it. In fact, I know more surely than ever that I don’t know how to do such a thing. I am just watching with fascination, and trying to keep out of the way.

I don’t seem to have lost any of the normal problems. The bills keep coming; the leaves keep falling; the day is too short, I cannot handle all the requests and complaints. I preach about tithing, and you cannot hear me. Nothing has changed. And yet everything is different. Some people think I am just temporarily high on too little to drink. Or as they say at Cabrini: “Reality is just an illusion caused by lack of alcohol.” But that is just the tip of it. Somewhere along the way, I don’t know how or why – in the midst of anger, resentment, aloneness and determined self-will – I tripped ... and fell into gratitude.

Gratitude is an old friend I had not seen in a long time. I had missed him terribly, but it had been so long that I had forgotten what he looked like, and I did not know where he lived anymore. Suddenly there he was again, out of nowhere I could imagine – calm and smiling and confident as ever. I was terribly embarrassed. I had neglected him badly. I should have looked him up long ago, but I did not want him to see me in my condition. Shy and apologetic, I suggested that maybe he should go on his way and look me up again in a few months when I had had a chance to get myself fixed up. He laughed and said he did not care what I looked like. We should walk together again, and see the wonders of life together again. “After all,” he said, “what are friends for

if they cannot share the hard times?” “Don’t be ridiculous,” I replied. “With you around, there can be no hard times. And I’m heading into a really hard time.” Then he really laughed. “Well,” he said finally, still chuckling, “I’m glad to see you still know the truth, even if you don’t act like it.”

He just plain flat refused to leave. I don’t know how he found me, and the attitude I was in at the time should have driven him off, if anything could. But he would not leave. And that’s why I am still here. Of course, I have my suspicions about who really sent him. That just makes me even more grateful.

I don’t know why I am telling you this. Talking about gratitude does not make anybody grateful. At least it never worked that way with me. But I just have to tell somebody. I stumbled onto that passage in Colossians the other day, for instance, and it just leapt out at me that one of the things the early Christians were doing a lot of was feeling grateful. Then I began to realize that, in a way, it was the *only* thing they were doing. At least, everything that mattered seemed to be coming from thankfulness and gratitude.

You know how sometimes the inner fog seems to blow away for a minute and things seem to get into their true perspective, kind of like the flash of a vision or something? Well, that’s the way it seemed to me for a while. I saw that everything I had ever done which did not spring from a genuine thankfulness was tainted and corrupted. The only deeds that matter anywhere on earth are those which come out of some sincere gratitude. That’s a bit more than my little mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, I saw it for a moment. And it was beautiful and true.

This sweeps through and throws a lot of my life into the trash bin. It also leaves some rather surprising things still standing. But that does not matter. Better to have seen it than never to have seen it. I even saw that Jesus went to the Cross in gratitude – gratitude to God for being stronger in Him than the fear of what men could do to Him. I knew He was courageous and obedient, but this was even bigger. He was grateful for a Kingdom most of us but dimly see. And gratitude is the highest and purest motive power in the universe – except for the love of God itself. That overwhelms me. I would like to talk more about it, though I don’t know enough to say any more about it right now. But consider some lesser things.

I.) GRATITUDE IS AN ATTITUDE – NOT AN EVENT

Somewhere along the line, most of us pick up the notion that gratitude is the result of some outer event. Something good happens to us, and then we feel grateful. Something bad happens, and we are ungrateful and sad. Therefore, our thankfulness – and behind that, our happiness – depends on what is happening to us. It is caused by events from outside. Therefore, we have a tendency, along with the rest of our culture, to look for and to hope for good things coming our way. And in fact, it is commonly believed that if we work for it correctly, we can *cause* the good events to come our way. Then, of course, we have no reason to be grateful, because we worked for it and deserve it.

Somehow, despite the logic of these assumptions, life does not bear out such expectations. Looking around us, it is glaringly obvious that gratitude bears no correlation to outward circumstances. Some people who “have everything,” as we say, are indeed grateful people. But if anything, they are rare among their kind. We do not have to observe life for very long to discover that things on the outside do not make people happy. Most of us know and say this for years before we believe it, but it is obvious. People can have a great overabundance of every kind of outward blessing and still be ungrateful, miserable and unhappy.

The reverse is even stranger to behold. Indeed, many people who live in circumstances we consider to be harsh or difficult or meager are also ungrateful and unhappy. But the correlation does not hold. We also meet many among them who inexplicably seem to be immensely grateful people.

One of the most grateful people I have ever known was a boy named Richy Bravacos. He spread love and joy and appreciation like perfume spreads its scent. Yet he struggled for every breath he took and died at age nineteen of cystic fibrosis.

Thanksgiving Day itself was born out of a poverty and need that would make many people today feel anything but grateful. Some of the folk involved were not feeling very grateful either. None of the plans were working out. Some wondered if God had deserted them, or if they were being punished for their unorthodox faith. It certainly looked like it! Landing at Plymouth was a mistake. Landing in December was a disaster. By springtime, forty-four of the one hundred were dead. It did not appear that God had gone out of his way to bless them.

But facing another winter, they counted up the harvest in November and it appeared that if food were carefully rationed, those who survived would have seed enough for the spring planting. So they got together to celebrate and give thanks to God. It makes some of our current Thanksgiving Day celebrations seem almost a mockery.

Martin Rinkart was pastor of the Lutheran Church in Eilenberg, Saxony, during the Thirty Years' War. Into his city came the refugees from the surrounding territory, with famine and plague close behind. In 1637 alone, eight thousand people died of the fever in Eilenberg. Rinkart was finally the only pastor left in the city, and he buried four thousand people in one terrible year. As the ordeal was ending, he wrote a hymn that is still sung today, though with little comprehension of its profound faith. In fact, you just sang it: "Now Thank We All Our God."

Paul thanks God from prisons and beatings and trials that look to us like utter defeat and devastation. Stephen thanks God as they hurl the stones that will kill him. Thankfulness is not linked to outward circumstances, good or bad. Gratitude is an attitude – not an event. It comes from within – not from without. The bad news is that we cannot just go get some. The good news is that once we find it, this world cannot take it away.

II.) GRATITUDE IS AN OVERALL RESPONSE – NOT A SPECIFIC JUDGMENT

Again, I am not of the notion that you do not know such things. Rather, I am enthralled with the rediscovery of them myself. Saying "thank you" for isolated items or favors does not make me a thankful person. On many occasions, "counting our blessings" can leave us less grateful than when we started. It gets us to focusing on our personal opinions of what we like or dislike or what we want or don't want. Perhaps you do not fall into this trap, but pretty soon I get to thinking that I was born into this world to give my personal opinion about everything. I like this kind of food; I don't like that kind of food. I like this kind of tree; I don't like that kind of tree. I like this kind of person; I don't like that kind of person. I like this kind of day; I don't like that kind of day – and if I don't get the kind of day I want, then I have a right to withhold my thanks and let everybody know how displeased I am. That's perhaps a slight caricature or exaggeration. But very slight!

Without realizing it, I am soon starting to use a very low-grade form of gratitude as a way to judge everything around me according to my whims of what pleases or displeases me. Every minute I remain in that mode, my gratitude is actually diminishing. I am playing God, and only God can get away with that.

Thankfulness, by its very inner meaning, is a response to God and therefore to all of life. Gratitude, by its very nature, implies that we are aware of something or someONE beyond and greater than ourselves. Thankfulness is always the mark of those who in some way recognize purpose and caring and blessings that are more than can be attributed to human effort alone. As such, thankfulness is the core and key to all true worship, personal or corporate. It is therefore also the source of faith. Faith *means* trusting God. There is a difference between trust and gratitude, but the two are inseparable. We trust God precisely to the degree that we are grateful. And we are grateful to the precise degree that we trust God. Gratitude comes from surrender – acknowledged dependence. Therefore, grateful people stop trying to put their personal stamp of approval on all the various items and events of life. Gratitude is a response to the whole show – to everything that comes and for everything that happens.

My personal likes and dislikes begin to fade to insignificance. Nobody really asked me my opinion anyway. I am here to learn and experience LIFE – not to judge or grade it. And thankfulness wells up when I begin to trust its Author for the design, the meaning, the outcome – the whole thing. Then I become a grateful person.

Counting our blessings is still a good thing to do, if we start out from an attitude of gratitude. Thanking people for the efforts they make on our behalf is a good thing to do also. Only, I have to be careful not to turn that into a little courtroom scene inside my head, where I am merely judging everything from my own notions of what I want or like. I'm sure it would not be so dangerous if I had the wisdom to know what my blessings were. Looking back, I am always amazed at how often I was thankful for things that had no real importance, sometimes even for things that turned out to be a curse. And also how I severely complained so many times at things that turned out to be great blessings. Some of you may have had the same experience.

The day the Redlands church split was one of the darkest days in my life. I made it dark, that is. It turned out to be an unspeakable blessing. Recently, I had an equally startling experience along the same line. But you know about that one.

III.) THE OPPOSITE OF PRIDE IS GRATITUDE

I don't know if it's true, but it seems to me that there are two kinds of power in the world. I don't mean physical energy, but motive power. Everything that humans do is being motivated from either the principle of pride or the principle of gratitude. It is coming from the urge to power, the need to gain control, the desire for domination – or it is coming from the response of thankfulness. People do things to get into a god-like position – or people do things in gratitude to God. Gratitude is the fuel of faith. It is the purest energy source for human endeavor.

And gratitude is the only motivation uncorrupted by human pride. If we do a person a service or a favor out of gratitude to God and to Life, they will end up blessed. If our action comes for any other reason, they will end up the worse for our attention – manipulated, controlled or dehumanized in some way, obvious or subtle. The deeds may even be identical on the surface, but the source from which they spring is either pride or gratitude. That will make all the difference in the end. I will not try to carry that thought any further today, though it goes into endless places. Gratitude – thankfulness – is the only motivation the saints of God will touch. Everything else leads to corruption.

One of the ten lepers felt thankful and turned back, praising God aloud. He was cured twice over. The other nine were merely cured of a physical disease. The tenth man realized that he had been loved. That cured him of the most deadly of all diseases. His thankfulness was not only the mark and proof of his cure, it was part of the cure itself.

Nine men got clean bodies. They lost the white marks of physical disaster. The tenth man lost that too – but in his thankfulness, he lost more. What stopped him in his tracks as he headed for the priests so they could declare him cured? “Where is it coming from? And why me? Is it an accident? Whence cometh this sudden miraculous blessing?” In the simplicity of childlike logic, he knew and stopped in his tracks. “It could not be an accident! Something cared! Somebody up there likes me, and I finally ran into some of his agents. I am loved!” And so he did not just lose the white marks of the present leprosy; he lost all the marks of fear and aloneness and despair that crush our souls, warp our deeds and deform our futures.

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“Stand up and go your way; your faith has cured you.” Indeed it had, for faith is knowing that you are loved. And thankfulness is the response and motive power that comes from that knowing.

They say that some people are in love with love. Maybe it's foolish, but I find myself being very grateful for stumbling back into gratitude. I still cannot figure out how it happened. Which is, I guess, even more reason for being grateful. Anyway, I know one grateful leper. How are you?