

The Attitude of Gratitude

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After more than two decades of ministry to hurting people, I have come to believe that a failure to give thanks is at the heart of much, if not most, of the sense of gloom, despair, and despondency that is so pervasive even among believers today. Furthermore, many of the sins that are plaguing and devastating our society can be traced back to the oft-undetected root of unthankfulness.

The "attitude of gratitude" is something that desperately needs to be cultivated in our hearts, our homes, and our society. Its presence brings a host of other blessings, while its absence has profound, lethal repercussions. Consider with me some of the contrasts between a grateful and an ungrateful heart:

A grateful person is humble, while ingratitude reveals pride.

The grateful person feels a great sense of unworthiness: "I have so much more than I de-serve." But an ungrateful person says, "I deserve so much more than I have."

I have always been impressed by the grateful spirit of Ruth the Moabitess. Widowed after less than a decade of marriage, an impoverished stranger in a foreign land, and "condemned" to live with her embittered mother-in-law, Ruth sought a way to support herself and Naomi. When she was discovered by Boaz, who extended to her the right to glean in his fields, she fell all over herself trying to express gratitude for his gracious gesture: "Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldst take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?" (Ruth 2:10, kjv).

Under similar circumstances, I might have been more likely to think, or even say to others, "It's the least he could do!" But the humility of this young widow is seen in her response of gratitude to the least little kindness shown her by another.

A grateful person is a loving person who seeks to gratify and bless others, while an ungrateful person is bent on gratifying himself.

One of the most common end results of ingratitude is the sin of moral impurity. The man or woman who is not thankful for the way God has met his or her needs easily begins to falsely accuse and find fault with our good God. In rejecting the provision God has already made, the ungrateful person is only one small step away from seeking to get his needs met in illegitimate ways.

A grateful heart is a full heart, while an unthankful heart is an empty one.

No matter how little he may actually have compared with others, a grateful person enjoys a sense of fullness. But no matter how much a person may in fact have, if he is not a thankful person, he will live with a gnawing sense of emptiness. I picture an unthankful heart as being something like a container with a hole in it that causes all its blessings to leak out. The grateful person has unlimited capacity to truly enjoy God's blessings, while the ungrateful person can't enjoy the blessings he does have.

The apostle Paul provides us with a powerful illustration of this principle. The Book of Philippians is a thank-you note, written to express gratitude for what the believers in Philippi had done to minister to Paul's material needs while he was traveling and planting churches.

Having expressed his heartfelt appreciation for their most recent gift, Paul, writing from a Roman prison and deprived of all but the barest of necessities, made a remarkable statement: "I have all, and abound: I am full" (Phil. 4:18)! Who but a grateful person could have assessed his incarcerated condition with those words?

A grateful person is easily contented, while an ungrateful person is subject to bitterness and discontent.

Years of counseling with people who are chronically unhappy, depressed, frustrated, and emotionally unstable have convinced me that these "disorders" often stem from an unthankful heart, regardless of any external circumstances that may appear to provide an explanation.

An ungrateful person holds tightly to his "rights" and sets himself up for hurt and disappointment when God or others fail to perform according to his expectations. But the individual who has yielded all his rights to God sees all of life through thankful eyes and has no room in his heart for selfish, destructive emotions.

A grateful heart will be revealed and expressed by thankful words, while an ungrateful heart will manifest itself in murmuring and complaining.

A grateful spirit is what enables people to view and respond to the most painful circumstances in life with thanksgiving. As one person observed, "Some people complain because God put thorns on roses, while others praise Him for putting roses among thorns."

Thankful believers from the past have much to teach us in this matter. Matthew Henry, the well-known commentator of the 19th century, was once accosted by robbers. Reflecting on the experience, he wrote in his diary, "Let me be thankful, first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because, although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed!"

We are called to be thankful people, to recognize and express appreciation for the benefits that we have received from God and others. We are all debtors, and we repay those debts with grateful hearts and words of thanksgiving. It is not enough to feel gratitude in our hearts. That gratitude must be communicated to those to whom we are indebted.

You and I cannot be truly free, though we have been released from bondage, if our hearts and tongues have ceased to give thanks. Perhaps right now would be a good time to take a trip to Calvary, to kneel before our incredible Savior, to look into His loving face, and to say, "Oh, Lord Jesus, thank You! Thank You! Thank You!"