

TAKEAWAY

Response
Part 6 – Gratitude

May 16, 2010

Growing Gratitude

Once upon a time there was a woman who grew tired of her house. She was tired of the same layout, the same rooms, the same kitchen. When she first bought the house, she thought it was amazing. Behind it was a wonderful lake, and visible just beyond the lake were mountains and a very green forest. In spite of its beauty, she became bored with the same view day after day. The house was not exciting to her anymore, so she decided to sell it. When the real estate agent came to list the house, she was shocked by the breathtaking beauty. It was not at all boring. She told the owner she was sure it would sell easily even in a difficult market.

The next week, the owner of the house searched the real estate listings for a new place and came across a fantastic sounding house. It was filled with amenities and was nestled in a lot by a lake and trees. The lot was far enough away from the city to allow for stargazing. The woman knew she had to have that house whatever the price, so she called her Realtor and told her so. The Realtor laughed and said, “That is a description of your own house.”

How often are we like that homeowner—unaware of the blessings we already have because we have taken them for granted for so long? How often do we lose our enchantment with life because we’ve become bored with our circumstances? Or perhaps they’re not boring, but they’ve become difficult. Maybe in the middle of our struggles we can’t see anything positive. I tend to be a pessimist. But lately God has been confirming to me that He is an optimist (how else could He have put up with humanity all these centuries?), and He wants me to be more like Him. Research is confirming that it’s not so much the negative circumstances in our lives that cause stress-related health problems—it’s how we react to them. Anxiety and worry have been shown to weaken the immune system. Perhaps you’re thinking, “Being content is easier said than done. You don’t know my situation.” The apostle Paul is a good example of how to respond positively in spite of difficulties. When he wrote the book of Philippians, he was in jail for preaching about Jesus. Read Philippians 4:11-13. Is Paul’s contentment dependent upon escaping his problems?

How can we be content—and even grateful—in spite of the challenges in our lives? Paul was also in prison when he wrote a letter to the Colossians. In Colossians 3:15 (The Message), he admonished his readers to “cultivate thankfulness.” Because I’m a gardener, the word *cultivate* implies work to me. It not only takes work to change a mindset or attitude, it also takes continual practice. I can’t just go out to my garden one time to plant and harvest. I have to work at it every day. The plants have to be watered, thinned, and fertilized, and the weeds have to be pulled. Likewise, cultivating a garden of contentment and gratitude takes energy. Thankfully, Jesus provides all the power we need to do this work. Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. In what areas of your life do you need the power of God’s all-sufficient grace?

Psalm 136 is called “the Great Hallel” and is a “call and response” prayer recited at Jewish Passover meals. Read this psalm as you imagine how Jesus probably recited this prayer with His disciples. Cultivate gratitude to God by making a list of the “wonders” God has worked in your life. As you read each one aloud, respond with the phrase, “His love endures forever.” Allow His love to take root in your life and your response of thankfulness to grow up into joy.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! 1 John 3:1a (NIV)

Gratitude ... The Flip Side

Jonathan Edwards has a word for our time that could hardly be more pointed if he were living today. It has to do with the foundation of gratitude.

True gratitude or thankfulness to God for his kindness to us, arises from a foundation laid before, of love to God for what He is in Himself; whereas a natural gratitude has no such antecedent foundation. The gracious stirrings of grateful affection to God, for kindness received, always are from a stock of love already in the heart, established in the first place on other grounds, viz. {namely} God's own excellency.

In other words, gratitude that is pleasing to God is not first a delight in the benefits God gives (though that is part of it). True gratitude must be rooted in something else that comes first—a delight in the beauty and excellence of God's character. If this is not the foundation of our gratitude, then it is not above what the "natural man"—apart from the Spirit and the new nature in Christ—experiences. In that case, "gratitude" to God is no more pleasing to God than all the other emotions that unbelievers have without delighting in Him.

You would not be honored if I thanked you often for your gifts to me, but had no deep and spontaneous regard for you as a person. You would feel insulted, no matter how much I thanked you for your gifts. If your character and personality do not attract me or give me joy in being around you, then you will just feel used, like a tool or a machine to produce the things I really "love."

So it is with God. If we are not captured by His personality and character, then all our declarations of thanksgiving are like the gratitude of a wife to a husband for the money she gets from him to use in her affair with another man. This is exactly the picture in James 4:3-4 (NASB). James criticizes the motives of prayer that treat God like a cuckold: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?" Why does he call these praying people "adulteresses"? Because, even though praying, they are forsaking their husband (God) and going after a paramour (the world). And to make matters worse, they are asking their husband (in prayer) to fund the adultery.

Amazingly, this same flawed spiritual dynamic is sometimes true when people thank God for sending Christ to die for them. Perhaps you have heard people say how thankful we should be for the death of Christ because it shows how much value God puts upon us. What is the foundation of this gratitude? Jonathan Edwards calls it the gratitude of hypocrites. Why? Because, they first rejoice, and are elevated with the fact that they are made much of by God; and then on that ground, He seems lovely to them...They are pleased in the highest degree, in hearing how much God and Christ make of them. Their joy is really a joy in themselves, and not in God. It is a shocking thing to learn that one of today's most common descriptions of how to respond to the cross may well be a description of natural self-love with no spiritual value.

We would do well to listen to Jonathan Edwards. Does he not simply spell out for us the biblical truth that we should do all things—including giving thanks—to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31)? And God is not glorified if the foundation of our gratitude is the worth of the gift and not the excellency of the Giver. If gratitude is not rooted in the beauty of God before the gift, it is probably disguised idolatry. May God grant us a heart to delight in Him for who He is, so that all our gratitude will be the echo of our joy in the Giver's excellency!

Excerpted from John Piper, *A Godward Life* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 1997), 213-214.

Getting Showered

There is an old joke that asks the question of which man is more content: the one with 12 children or the one with 12 billion dollars. The answer is...the one with 12 kids, because he doesn't want any more. We may laugh at that, but there is some truth in it. When asked how much money is enough, J. Paul Getty (one of the richest men of his day) replied, "Just a little bit more." One of the questions we need to ask ourselves is this: If worship is the appropriate response to the revelation of God, then what is the appropriate response when God reveals His generosity to us and showers us with blessing?

We live in a country that is blessed. Our financial condition is so far above the rest of the world that it's almost hard to fathom. It's not only financially that we have so much, it's also with freedoms. We have the freedom to gather and to worship God. We have access to resources for learning about God that most of the world could only dream of. Should we feel guilty about that? I don't think so, but we must ask ourselves how we should respond based on the fact that we have been given so much.

One option we have is shown in a parable Jesus told in Luke 12:13-21. What do you notice? How could this man's actions be similar to ours at times? Jesus went on to tell about the preferred response in verses 22-34. Notice how the way we handle these blessings directly relates to our relationship with God. What promises does Jesus give—both positive and negative?

One of the marks of true gratitude is that it imitates. In other words, it gives. It gives back in thankfulness and praise (Luke 17:11-19). But it also gives what it has been given. Maybe you have been financially blessed. Then, be generous (1 Timothy 6:17-19). If you have been given comfort and encouragement, then give the same to others (2 Corinthians 1:4-5). The greatest thing you can give is to help someone move toward God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). God has richly blessed you, so as worship to God, go and do likewise.

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