

GRATITUDE by Dr. Demarco

In Luke 17:11–19, we read the story of the ten lepers. Jesus was traveling between Samaria and Galilee. As He entered a certain town (scholars believe it was Jenin, a pleasant little town seated on a hill in the midst of orchards and watercourses), ten lepers implored Him from an appropriate distance to have mercy on them. Jesus responded by instructing them to show themselves to the priests. This was not a cure but the promise of a cure. Lepers could be readmitted to society only after they had been certified by priests that they were completely clean. Obedient to the Master's instruction, the lepers made their way to the priests. En route, miraculous cures began to transpire. One of the ten, a Samaritan, returned to Jesus to express his gratitude. After prostrating himself before the feet of Jesus and offering copious thanks, the Samaritan heard Him say, to all who were present: "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?" (Luke 17:17–18).

First Thanksgiving

This story makes it clear that gratitude pleases Jesus very much, while its absence brings Him sorrow. All ten showed humility, reverence, obedience, and faithfulness. We have neither the means nor the right to pass judgment on the nine who did not return to Jesus to express their gratitude. Perhaps they felt that their most urgent obligation was to present themselves before the priests. We do not know, though even postponing their expression of gratitude called forth their Savior's sorrowful expression.

The fact that Jesus did not cure all ten lepers immediately gave them the opportunity to decide whether or not they should return to Him directly and express their gratitude as soon as their cures took place. The delayed miracle allows the story to underscore the significance of gratitude and invites us to reflect on why Jesus prizes it so highly.

Count Our Blessings

Gratitude is a response to a gift. Because there is a wide range in the importance of gifts, there is, correspondingly, an equally wide range in levels of gratitude. For lesser gifts, such as giving someone the time of day, a simple expression of thanks is little more than a courtesy. But the large gifts—life itself, a miraculous cure, sacramental gifts—demand that gratitude include far more than a gesture of courtesy. God's generous presence in our lives lays claim to a form of gratitude that is never satisfied by the mere recitation of thanks, but requires us to express our gratitude in action. The kind of gratitude that God is hoping to find is one that includes a bond of friendship and a commitment to service.

God wants our full gratitude because He wants our continuing friendship, which enables Him to lavish us with additional gifts. We know how easy it is to be ungrateful, how a preoccupation with ourselves can cause us to forget our benefits as well as our benefactors. But in addition to that, ingratitude weakens our bonds with both God and neighbor. Saint Bernard has said: "Ingratitude is a searing wind which dries up the springs of pity, the dew of mercy, the streams of grace." Ingratitude leads to spiritual isolation. Therefore, gratitude, which is a triumph over selfishness and isolation, is most pleasing to God.

Timely Reminder

In 1863, during the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln was deeply concerned that America no longer seemed gratefully disposed to her Creator. In order to remind his fellow countrymen of their need to thank God and reestablish their friendship with Him, he proclaimed a national day of “humiliation, fasting, and prayer.” On that day, Lincoln stated that although Americans had been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven, they had forgotten God: We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.

Lincoln’s understanding of the importance of gratitude was profound. He knew that a weakened relationship with God inevitably meant a weakened relationship with neighbor. The Civil War was ample testimony to that fact.

Better Than Santa

Gratitude is the memory of the heart, as someone has said. It is, therefore, an expression of love and abiding friendship. Gratitude is an expression that soon transforms itself into deed. Two ways we can express gratitude in our actions are through humility and restraint. As G.K. Chesterton has said, “*We should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not drinking too much of them.*”

There can be no happiness without gratitude. We need to know whom to thank for the gift of life. But we also need to thank Him, and the proper form of thanks is to safeguard and cherish what we have been given. Humility and restraint are appropriate ways in which we can show how much we truly appreciate what has been given to us. To quote Chesterton once again: Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs?

GENEROSITY

It belongs to the nature of giving that a gift be given to another. Strictly speaking, one cannot give a gift to himself.

The highest gift we can give to another is the gift of ourselves. Giving ourselves in this way epitomizes the virtue of generosity. The perfect example of generosity is God the Creator. By means of His generosity, He generates man in His image. For Christians, God’s gift of Himself through Christ represents the ultimate form of generosity, and serves as a model for all human generosity.

Because God creates—or generates—man in His image out of His own generosity, a dynamic impulse toward generosity is implanted in the depth of man’s being. As a consequence, to live authentically means to give generously. Personality and generosity, therefore, are virtually synonymous. To live authentically is to give generously of oneself. The great Thomistic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, underscored this unification of personality with generosity when he wrote: “Do not heroes and saints impress us as men who have reached the heights of personality as well as generosity?”

Gotta Give

When a person is in touch with the depths of himself, he realizes that at the very center of his being, coincidental with his existence, is the impulse toward generosity. To be is to give; to be fulfilled is to have given generously. The very meaning of life is inseparable from generosity. Everyone recognizes that generosity is more admirable than greed, and more beautiful, more original, more authentic, and more humane. The fact that greed is as common as it is indicates that human beings can be estranged from themselves while trying to live a life that is alien to them.

Since the time of Socrates, philosophers have been reiterating the essential importance of distinguishing between the order of being and having. Martin Buber wrote beautifully about the “I-Thou” relationship that cultivates our being, or our humanness, and the “I-It” relationship that allows us to have those things that allow us to live. Without “I-It” we cannot live, but without “I-Thou” we cannot be human. Things cannot humanize us, only generous love can.

Greed, the antithesis of generosity and the negation of personal being, enters the picture when our attachment to the things we can have displaces our awareness of our own being. But no amount of having can ever make up for a neglect of being. A form of frenzied addiction ensues when a person believes that if he could only have more of something, he would be able to quench his thirst. Unfortunately, the logic of greed is such that the appetite grows on what it feeds. This is the diabolical phenomenon that Shakespeare describes in Macbeth when he has Malcolm say: “[M]y more-having would be as a sauce to make me hunger more.”

I Want More!

Nothing exceeds like excess! Greed becomes more avaricious the more it has. This paradoxical effect is connected with the fact that a person becomes increasingly frustrated the more he ignores his own fundamental capacity for generosity.

Literary characters such as King Midas, Silas Marner, Ebenezer Scrooge, and The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, are driven by greed in such a way that the more greedy they become, the less human they appear. The conversions of Midas, Marner, Scrooge, and the Grinch are, in effect, returns to humanity, and are met by readers with great jubilation. Generous people are not only more likeable than their greedy counterparts, but they appear to be more human, more real. A wealthy man can easily become a displaced person, alienated from himself, if he takes his riches too seriously. Plato warned long ago that we should bequeath to our children not riches but reverence. Sigmund Freud explained that wealth never makes a man happy because it does not correspond to a basic human drive. None of us comes into the world with a desire to make money. The impulse to have does not originate in our being.

On the other hand, a poor man, who is in touch with the fundamental generosity of his existence, can be productive, happy, and at peace with himself. It is more blessed to give than to receive; but it is far more blessed to give than to take. In the final analysis, we cannot take with us what we have. Greed is an affliction of the dispossessed. Generosity is the plenitude of the self-possessed.

It Isn't Enough

Maurice Sendak has written a charming little book for children called *Higglety Pigglety Pop! or There Must Be More To Life*. In the story, the owners of Jennie the dog have given her everything. Yet she decides: "There must be more to life than having everything." She leaves home and loses all she has, but instead becomes the leading star of a theatrical production, to her great contentment. The point is made only too clear, even for ten-year-olds, that happiness depends not on how much we have, but on who we are. Being is more primary than having. And at the center of our being is the divinely implanted impulse to give and to be generous. To the calculating mind, being generous seems to be costly. To the generous heart, being greedy seems incomprehensible. It is greed that impoverishes us, not generosity. True generosity, indeed, enriches us a hundredfold. There is a superabundance within each of us. Not to release it costs us who we are. Nothing, therefore, is more costly than greed; nothing is more rewarding than generosity.

Generosity II

Generosity inspires gratitude, and gratitude inspires generosity. God is generous to us and our generosity, as Saint Paul tells us, "gives proof of our gratitude towards God" (2 Cor. 9:11, Knox Bible). In gratitude we are human; in generosity we are divine: "You received without pay, give without pay" (Mt. 10:8).

The Virtue That Keeps Giving

An admirer of the great German composer, Johannes Brahms, left him one thousand pounds in his will. Upon learning about the bequest, Brahms was deeply moved. "It touches me most deeply and intimately," he wrote to a friend. "All exterior honors are nothing in comparison." Then, in the very next sentence, he informed his friend that since he did not need the money, he was "enjoying it in the most agreeable manner, by taking pleasure in its distribution." Thus, the virtue that touched Brahms inspired replication of itself in the generosity that Brahms himself demonstrated. And one hopes that it stirred the same virtue among his beneficiaries. Generosity is the virtue that can go on mirroring itself until the end of time.

Logic or Madness?

What are the limits of generosity? Since virtue is rooted in love, this question is tantamount to asking, "What are the limits of love?"

Brad Barrows, age 37, of East Hartford, Connecticut, prayed that he would be able to do something exceptionally loving for someone. During prayer he felt a powerful call to donate a kidney. The call was so vivid and compelling that, in his judgment, "it sounded almost like a voice."

Barrows contacted the National Kidney Foundation and was told that he did not qualify as a donor because he was neither dead nor had a friend or loved one in need of a kidney. Undeterred, he got in touch with the Hartford Transplant Associates. There he found a sympathetic ear in its coordinator, Cathy Drouin. Nonetheless, she knew that the idea of donating an organ to a perfect stranger would be repugnant to the medical world and advised Barrows that, if he were determined to donate a kidney, he would first have to prove his sanity. The logic of generosity can easily resemble the delirium of madness. Or, as John Bunyan once said: "A man there was tho' some did count him mad, the more he cast away, the more he had."

Barrows did manage to get psychiatric clearance and was matched up with a suitable prospective recipient: José Spivey, age twelve, who was spending eleven hours a day on a home-dialysis machine. In addition, José had to leave his home in Cromwell, Connecticut, three times a week for three-hour sessions at Hartford Hospital.

Barrows has become José's Big Brother (Big Brother is an organization that connects boys who are lacking a father with male mentors). Their first meeting was carried off with aplomb. José explained to Barrows how he used his home-dialysis equipment. Barrows explained the meaning of "Love God" on the gold-plated cross he wears around his neck.

"Love God" required some explaining, for it is inscribed in Braille. Brad Barrows is blind, a fact that makes his generosity—together with its complete absence of any hint of resentment—all the more inspirational.

"I'll literally be your blood brother," Barrows, who is white, explains to José, who is black. "You can feel free to share anything. That's what Big Brothers are for."

It remains to be seen whether the kidney transplant will be successful. But even if it should fail, the failure would not dim the luster of Brad Barrows' generosity. And, while it is a level of generosity we might not be able to imitate, it is surely one that we can admire.

Gift of Light

Hope is often associated with light. One refers, for example, to the "light at the end of the tunnel." The fact that a blind man is offering a young boy hope—while the rest of the world watches—attests to the spiritual nature of light and how it can emerge from the most unlikely places.

Generosity begets gratitude, which begets generosity. But all the while, as the cycle continues, it sends out sparks of hope. Thank God for Brad Barrows and the hope he is sending out from his own darkness to a world that is so urgently in need of light.

Generosity

You are most generous,
Accepting my poor poetry
As ample payment for your smile,
Mere words as fitting tribute
For your bright, vivacious style;
My praise, then, sinks me deeper in your debt,
Far enough to still my pen, except
For one redeeming fact that warrants this encore:
Artful acclamation makes
Your soul shine all the more.

DeMarco, D. (2000). The Many Faces of Virtue (pp. 177–189). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.

Mission (Almost) Impossible by Dr. Demarco

Christians are commanded to make sure that their thanks are heartfelt. But more than that, they are commanded to give thanks for everything. “[G]ive thanks in all circumstances;” Saint Paul writes, “for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:18). It is easy to be thankful for good things, but to be thankful for difficulties—rejection, sickness, death, and so forth—at first glance seems to be absurd.

But Christian commandments are like this. They demand the seemingly implausible. Scripture enjoins us to love our enemies, do good to those who harm us, pray for those who persecute and calumniate us (Mt. 5:44). They obligate us to forgive, daily, those who trespass against us (Mk. 11:25). Mark Twain exquisitely captured both the beauty and difficulty of this demanding quality of Christian forgiveness when he said, “Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that crushed it.” It is not that Christianity is indiscriminate, but that it is omnivorous! Virtues should be directed to all people, and at all times.

Christian thankfulness, which is to say, supernatural thankfulness, is inseparable from the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. When David proclaims, “[G]ive thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever” (Ps. 136:1), he is inviting us to have faith in God, to hope for good things, and to maintain our love for Him. True thankfulness is webbed to a multitude of virtues.

DeMarco, D. (2000). The Many Faces of Virtue (pp. 224–225). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.