

A Grateful Heart

by the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

*Oh that men would praise the Lord for His goodness
and for His wonderful works to the children of men!*
(Psalm 107:15)

Have you ever noticed that some people seem to recognize more things to be grateful for in their lives than others? This is not primarily caused by having more good events actually occurring for that person. In the story of the ten lepers being healed by the Lord, the same miracle occurred for them all, but only one returned to thank Him. The other nine must have noticed the miracle of their healing. What was going on in their minds that they did not return to Jesus to thank Him?

A person's thankfulness depends significantly on his or her state of mind. For example, four people might receive exactly the same benefit. One could be too busy focusing on something else to even really notice. A second could be so frustrated and angry that he hadn't already received the benefit that he is still resentful when it happens. A third might feel discouraged or depressed because he is so needy. But the fourth could feel a deep sense of gratitude. The benefit might be the same, but the reactions would be quite different.

We are not told what happened in the minds of the nine lepers who were healed but did not return to the Lord. Perhaps they were so caught up in the need to show themselves to the priest that nothing else entered their minds. Perhaps they were so focused on the next thing that they did not make time to return to the Lord to give thanks. Only one, a Samaritan, returned to Jesus, loudly glorifying God and falling in humble acknowledgment at His feet. We are not told, but perhaps something in the Samaritan's background made him less likely to take a miracle for granted and to respond with a deep gratitude for his healing.

Another example of thankfulness is given in a memorable experience from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church about a man who died and went to the afterlife. When he first awoke to that new life, he did not even realize that he had died. At the appropriate time he was informed by angels that he had died and that he now had none of the worldly possessions that he had left behind. At first the man was filled with concern about his welfare because he could no longer take care of himself. The angels told him that after death, the Lord provides directly for each person's needs. The angels then helped the man in many ways, carefully serving each of his needs. When this man had time by himself, his mind turned to thoughts of gratitude, and he wondered how he could repay the great kindnesses that had been shown to him. He could have been resentful for not still being in the world. He could have been still focusing on the things that he had left behind. But instead he was filled with a deep sense of gratitude, and his thoughts turned to how he could express that gratitude. We are told that this indicated that the man was ready to be lifted almost immediately into heaven (see *Arcana Coelestia* 318).

People have made special opportunities for expressing thanksgiving or gratefulness throughout history. They have felt grateful and have wanted to express this gratitude in some way. How often do you feel gratitude toward the Lord? We may say a blessing at mealtimes and prayers at other times, but how often do we *feel* grateful? Do you feel grateful when it comes time to

celebrate Thanksgiving? For some people Thanksgiving is just a day to eat a big meal and perhaps watch a lot of football on the television. Listen and you might hear evidence that some people don't even associate the day with thanks. They call it "Turkey day."

Like that Samaritan, we should show gratitude to the Lord for all He does for us. The passage from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that was our third lessons tells us that "The Lord does...demand humility, worship, thanksgiving, and much else.... But the Lord does not demand those things for His own sake.... Rather, they are required for a person's own sake, for if someone possesses humility he is able to accept good from the Lord..." (*Arcana Coelestia* 5957). We need to feel grateful, not for the Lord's sake, but for our own.

But what if we do not feel grateful? Can we make ourselves feel grateful? No, not really. We have control, to an extent, over our thoughts. We can control our actions. But we cannot directly control our feelings. Just as we cannot successfully make ourselves feel loving when we do not, so also we cannot make ourselves feel grateful when we do not. Feeling grateful does not arise from a conscious decision. Most likely the last time you felt grateful it was because you felt cared for. Someone went out of his or her way for you, doing something especially nice. Do you feel well cared for by the Lord? Do you have some recognition of receiving good affections and wise insights from Him? (The service of the Holy Supper is an image of us receiving these things from the Lord.)

Why does the Lord demand thanksgiving if we cannot make ourselves feel grateful? What can we do while you wait for the feeling to come? It is our job to control our actions and monitor the things that we are thinking about. Even when we do not *feel* thankful, we can *act* in thankful ways. We can make time for those acts of worship that express thanks. We can attend church, say prayers, and share what blessings we have with others. We can do all of these things before we feel very thankful. We can reflect on the things that have happened in our lives. We can think of the benefits we have received, the talents we have been blessed with and the loving friends we have. Sometimes when we reflect, a feeling of gratitude arises. When we take time to stop and think, we may have no trouble feeling thankful.

But when we are in a dark mood, life can seem so bleak that nothing looks great—everything looks flawed. One example of this state occurs when a person senses that his or her marriage has gone cold. The spouse seems like the enemy. His or her actions seem calculated to irritate. All the spouse's faults seem huge. At these times, one just doesn't *feel* love. The Lord has quite distinctly told us that these times of cold in marriage can and do happen, and they don't just happen in bad marriages. From time to time cold will come into every marriage. What should one do then?

When a husband feels cold toward his wife, he cannot directly change that feeling. But he can avoid expressing his lack of love as much as possible. He can consciously make gestures of caring and friendship. He can act in a loving way even when expressions of affection may arouse disgust. Doing nice things may take a tremendous amount of self compulsion, yet this is the only way out of a state of cold in marriage. *We cannot directly change our feelings*, that is the Lord's job. Our job is to work on what we are doing and thinking. This is what the Lord told us to do when we do not feel love in marriage.

It is not hard to see how this doctrine applies to times when we do not feel grateful to the Lord. Such times will occur for all of us. We can recognize that our lack of gratitude is our state of mind and acknowledge it to ourselves and the Lord. Yet we should not dwell morbidly on our lack of thankfulness. What we can do is think about the Lord's care, perhaps reflecting on Him as our Shepherd, or as our heavenly Father.

A key to feeling grateful is seeing things to be grateful for. We do not consciously see what the Lord is doing for us as it is happening. The Lord wants His work to be invisible in this way. Indeed, it is essential for our freedom that we do not see His work too clearly. Yet we are told that the Lord works in more ways than we can possibly think of. He works with everything around us from the greatest events to the tiniest particles of each of our lives.

One of the ways the Lord works is by means of other people, people who can express something of His love and His care. By using the people around us, the Lord can touch our lives with some of the greatest blessing of life. Too often we do not see these gifts from the Lord. Somehow we miss the caring and efforts of those around us. Consequently, we miss seeing things that could arouse a sense of gratitude. Why don't we see the good things that are happen around us? We are told that our minds focus on things that are directly related to what we love. When we do not care about something, we give little attention to it.

It is interesting that when the angels look at other people, they scarcely see any evil in them, but instead focus on what is good and true. They even work to put a good interpretation on what is bad. The opposite is true of evil spirits, who tend to see nothing but evil in others. If they see anything good they either perceive it as nothing or put a bad interpretation on it (*Arcana Coelestia* 1079). Now, of course, we cannot simply assume the outlook of the angels. There are parts of each of us that stand in the way of seeing what is good in those around us. But if we want to make progress, we can recognize the thoughts of contempt that we have for other people. We can recognize when we are dismissing the efforts of others as insignificant. We can recognize that we usually spend more effort looking for evil in others than we do looking for what is good.

The further we progress at fighting these self-centered parts of our thinking, the more we will be able to see good things happening around us. We will see other people doing loving things. We will see them supporting things that we believe are important. We will begin to see all the good that is going on in the world. And this will not be some shallow effort to look through "rose-colored glasses." It will not be merely a habit of saying "Isn't that nice" about everything, whether it really is nice or not.

Instead we will begin, more and more, to see things that are *truly* good. We will begin to see something of the Lord's love. We may begin to recognize, in retrospect, something of His leading. We will start to sense the Lord's presence in all things of life. And, as we come to see the Lord presence in those around us—as we come to recognize the power of His good, a feeling of gratefulness will well up in our hearts. Feeling thankful will be quite easy.

The Lord does indeed call us to acts of thanksgiving even before we feel thankful. He does so not as a burden, but rather to encourage us to work toward a state of mind in which gratitude will come to us easily. Each of us can prepare to feel truly thankful by working to see good things in those around us. We can work to rid our minds of thoughts that tend to diminish the value of other people's work. We can work to focus on what are truly the most important parts of our lives. This is the labor of a lifetime. As we make progress, we will more and more enter a state like the leper who returned to thank the Lord. Then our thankful actions will more and more come to be the true expression of a thankful heart.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 107; Luke 17:11-19; *Arcana Coelestia* 5957