

THE KEY TO FEELING GRATEFUL

Adapted from a sermon by the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

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 gift. 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 gift 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 gift 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.

Like that Samaritan, we should show gratitude to the Lord for all He does for us. A passage from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church 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?

We all have times when we do not feel grateful to the Lord, and we need to recognize when this is our state of mind. 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. And we can make time for those acts of worship that express thanks. Even when we do not *feel* thankful, we can *act* in thankful ways. We can attend church, say prayers, and share what blessings we have with others.

A key to feeling grateful is seeing things to be grateful for. Most of the time, we do not consciously see what the Lord is doing for us as it is happening. Indeed, it is essential for our freedom that we do not see His work too clearly. Yet the Lord works in more ways than we can possibly think of, from the greatest events to the tiniest moments of our lives. One of the ways He works is by means of other people, people who can express something of His love and care. By using the people around us, the Lord can touch our lives with some of His greatest blessings.

Somehow we do not see these gifts from the Lord. 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 happening around us? One reason is 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, 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 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. Then feeling thankful will be quite easy.

The Lord does ask us to act in a thankful way, even when we do not feel thankful. He does this to encourage us to work toward a state of mind in which gratitude will come 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 and words will more and more come to be the true expression of a thankful heart.