

An Attitude of Gratitude

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Everyday that begins with a thank you creates an attitude of gratitude.

I always try to start my day by making a list of all the things I am grateful for and the other day, I was sitting by myself going over my gratitude list and the memories of Thanksgiving 10 years ago flooded back, just like it was yesterday. Our younger son, Peter, was struggling terribly with his addiction to drugs and alcohol then, and had relapsed yet again. Peter's spiral down to this hell was fast and furious. In a matter of a few years Peter went from experimentation to full blown addiction and he was in the state of Washington at a treatment center for 5 months. While Peter was learning the tools to living a sober life, my husband, Gerry and I were doing everything we could to understand this disease- family programs, counseling, Al-Anon, reading numerous books on addiction. We were also trying to recover. We were all trying so hard, but recovery at that point for Peter was not in the cards. Peter had started using again and on that Thanksgiving 10 years ago we did not where Peter was, if he was on the streets, alive, if this terrible disease of addiction was going to kill him.

That Thanksgiving we were trying to cope, trying to carry on and I remember it was time for our thanksgiving meal, and as we always do on Thanksgiving each of us adds to the thanksgiving prayer, saying something we are thankful for. There was crying during that prayer, praying for Peter's safety, for his journey back to recovery, but the overwhelming thread throughout all of our prayers was the gratitude we felt knowing Peter was not alone. Each one of us said, "thank you God for being with Peter today, for keeping your arms around him and never letting go." We thanked God for being with each one us, never letting us go as we went through this horrifying time. Later that Thanksgiving night, Peter called and was crying, he said, "dad, mom, I really need help. I really want to get well, can you help me get to treatment? We were so thankful to hear those words! The outpouring of gratitude our family felt and showed God, after hearing those words from our son- you know it reminds me of the 10th leper. As he had, we cried, we laughed, we sang praises to God for the healing touch that had been placed in Peter's heart that Thanksgiving Day.

Looking at our Luke scripture today, it surprises me that all 10 lepers didn't come running back to shower their gratitude on Jesus. Now, each of the men did act in faith. They did exactly as Jesus instructed. Jesus told them to go to the priests and have their conditions inspected. This was proper practice, for they could not return to their community and participate in the religious and cultural life unless they were declared free of their skin disease. Jesus tells them to go before they are actually healed, but as they head off, they are cleansed. Out of the ten, the Samaritan, the hated outcast is the only one to return to Jesus and worship him. He came running back to Jesus, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Jesus certainly noticed, as he said, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Clearly, he is disappointed with the other 9 lepers that didn't return to give thanks. Keep in mind that the other 9 lepers did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They were obedient. They followed instructions. Can't fault them for that. And don't make the mistake that they weren't grateful that they no longer had leprosy. However, only one directed his gratitude to the healer. Only one returned to Jesus to say thank you. The 10th leper, the Samaritan, displayed an attitude of gratitude. And that according to Jesus makes all the difference, it is right and appropriate to give thanks to the one who blesses you. The Samaritan's gratitude showed Jesus that while the others had experienced the healing of their bodies, this guy had also found healing in his soul. Jesus hopes all of us will nurture an attitude of gratitude by showing thanks, giving thanks, and being filled with thanksgiving.

How is our attitude of gratitude? I find that I fall short so many times when I fail to thank God for so many of the blessings I receive, I fall short when I fail to thank God, believing that I have earned the good things that happen to me. I fail to thank God when ever I thank my "lucky stars" rather than the Lord. You see, when we think about it, we are really not much different than the 9 lepers. We receive blessings all of the time and often take them, enjoy them and never give God thanks for them. Gratitude is the recognition that life owes

me nothing and all the good I have is a gift from God. Gratitude is where we begin to experience God in a powerfully personal way. "Thank you" is the simplest and one of the most powerful prayers a person can say. If I can say thank you, I can connect with God and begin to develop a personal relationship with my creator. True gratitude focuses on the greatness of the giver rather than the gift.

Thomas Merton says it like this; "To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything He has given us- and He has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of His love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from Him. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference."

I don't know about you, but I sometimes find it hard to remember to give thanks for the everyday stuff. I try to remind myself that there are no ordinary moments. This is the essence of gratitude. No moment, nothing in life, should be taken for granted. In developing gratitude for every moment- for the simple joys, and even for the challenging times in our lives- we come to truly enjoy and appreciate life. Then we are able to see the magic that surrounds us every second of every minute of every day. Gratitude is the daily practice of looking for the good things in life, no matter how small.

We may need to discipline ourselves to practice gratitude. Daphne Rose Kingma writes about the different aspects of gratitude we may find in our own lives. She writes, "In relation to others, gratitude is good manners; in relation to ourselves, it is a habit of the heart and a spiritual discipline". One of the gratitude disciplines that my son, Peter, has learned in his journey to recovery is that of a gratitude journal. At the end of every day he writes at least five things he is grateful for. By writing out a list of gratitudes every day Peter has begun to develop a different perspective on his life. He is able to appreciate the little things that go well during the day. If we wait to be grateful only for the big things, the chances are we will never be grateful at all. Peter strives to have gratitude for life as it is, not as he would like it to be, or he fantasizes it may be, but gratitude for what life is today. Peter knows that if he sees doing a gratitude list as a chore and thankfulness as a burden, he won't make much progress.

A gratitude list looks at strengths, and points the way to possibilities instead of impossibilities. It provides him with building blocks rather than stumbling blocks. It is a key to action. Without a clear understanding of real possibilities, there often can be no action.

Peter, as well as most of us, may find that it is hard to be grateful for problems in our lives. None of us would find it easy to be grateful for being an alcoholic, a drug addict, or for some of us experiencing a divorce, or for having lost a job, the death of a loved one. We have all suffered some very real hurt and need to grieve significant losses. But we need to realize that, in coping with these problems we are not alone, God is always with us. Sometimes, our experiences of pain may help us to understand and empathize with the troubles of those around us. Sometimes the challenge of our lives may help in building our own character. Often, these tough experiences create a turning point in our lives, we realize we need to go in a new direction or travel a new path. When I can maintain an attitude of gratitude even on a bad day, the really challenging days may not feel as bad, and the good days will seem that much sweeter. Ralph Marston writes about this kind of attitude; "If you focus on resentment, you'll create many more things to resent. When you focus on gratitude, you'll bring many more things into your life for which to be thankful. By choosing your focus, you choose your lifestyle, the world around you, and your future. Focus on what is truly good and right and valuable for you, and you will be gloriously immersed in that goodness."

Through the struggle of addiction our family has been reminded often that our prayers of thanksgiving aren't just to be when life is going well. The apostle Paul, wrote, "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus". We are to thank God at all times, in all situations. We thank God when the sun is shining and when dark clouds seem to overwhelm us. We thank God when things are going well and when it's difficult. The bottom line of a grateful heart is that it recognizes that the very nature of God is one of goodness, and that wonderful goodness isn't hidden. God is with us always, God will remain faithful, God loves all of us.

I can say it hasn't been easy. I have failed to be thankful so many times during this journey, instead being overwhelmed by anxiety and fear. I have tried to hold Psalm 100 close to my heart. "Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name. For the Lord is good and His love endures forever; His faithfulness continues through all generations". There is something very special when we come into the presence of God with a heart of praise and thanksgiving. God inhabits our praises and fills our grateful hearts with His love and goodness.

How will we all express our gratitude today? How about that visit to your mom you have been putting off, or that email to a friend far away. How about a touch, a smile, a simple "I love you". I think I will call Peter in Colorado this afternoon, I need to send him a big hug through the phone lines, tell him I love him and thank God for the blessing of another day with Peter in my life. Let's weave gratitude into the fabric of our daily existence. Let's be grateful. And you know what happens when we do? We will grow in thankfulness in all aspects of our lives and this spreads to all others we come into contact with. We will become generous and grateful people. What a better way to live, then with an attitude of gratitude.