

Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude
Psalm 96:1-9
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

In his book FOLK PSALMS OF FAITH, Ray Stedman tells of an experience H.A. Ironside had in a crowded restaurant. Just as Ironside was about to begin his meal, a man approached and asked if he could join him. Ironside invited him to have a seat. Then, as was his custom, Ironside bowed his head in prayer. When he opened his eyes, the other man asked, "Do you have a headache?" Ironside replied, "No, I don't." The other man asked, "Well, is there something wrong with your food?" Ironside replied, "No, I was simply thanking God as I always do before I eat."

The man said, "Oh, you're one of those, are you? Well, I want you to know I never give thanks. I earn my money by the sweat of my brow and I don't have to give thanks to anybody when I eat. I just start right in!"

Ironside said, "Yes, you're just like my dog. That's what he does too!"¹

It's a shame when persons become so self satisfied that they credit everything in life to their own success. How hard is it for a person like this to give God credit much less anyone else. I've known many persons throughout the years who have convinced themselves that all of their success in life is completely due to their own hard work. Now while I do not argue that their hard work certainly contributed to their success, but I would have to argue that there are more factors in life than simply ones own contribution to life. Geneticists would argue that our birth parents and those who factored into raising us as children contributed to our current life state as much as the bodies we were born into. Certainly neither one of these factors is self-made. We did not get to choose who gave birth to us, nor did we have any choice what bodies we were born with.

But this is not the extent to what makes up who we are today. Other factors include the culture and economy we were raised in, the friends who influenced our actions, and the situations we encountered that shaped us in many ways. The good and bad experiences we went through growing up all had an impact on who we are today. Our perspectives on life and our luxuries in life are dependant on the many ways others have shaped who we are.

And of course, when we put our trust in God, our eyes are opened up to the multitude of ways that God has blessed and shaped our lives. We begin to recognize all the times that God's hand was at play in our lives and all the little and big things that God is responsible for in who we are today. Sometimes we don't recognize how God is at work in our lives until much later, but once we have clarification, we suddenly have eyes that see things in new ways.

¹ Ray Stedman, Folk Psalms of Faith. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/thanksgiving.htm> (accessed October 11, 2011).

Knowing that our lives have been shaped and molded by a multitude of factors begs the notion that we should be thankful for the factors in our lives that have made things good and blessed. This means recognizing and being thankful to God and others who have helped our lives along the way.

Have you ever noticed that the quickest way to get someone's positive attention is by beginning the conversation with a compliment or words of thanks? Even if the conversation needs to address a problem or concern, a preface of thanksgiving brings a positive response from the one who is being addressed.

For example, in confronting a neighbor whose dog is barking all night long, here are two potential responses. The first is approach the neighbor and complain about how the barking is keeping you up all night and if he doesn't do something about it then you will call the cops. An alternate approach, with a response of gratitude, might be something like this: "Hi neighbor... I wanted to thank you for bringing in my trash can last week when I got home really late. Oh, and while I am thinking about it, is there any way I can help you find a way to get your dog to stop barking in the middle of the night? I imagine it must be frustrating."

Now, if you were the neighbor, which conversation would you be more likely to respond to in a positive light? Of course you would be much happier with the second.

The Apostle Paul was no dummy. He knew the power of gratitude, not only to God, but also to those he had to work with in ministry. Even when he had to address delicate issues with Christians in distant towns, he knew how to get them to listen. This is why he skillfully begins his letters with salutations that include thanksgivings. Here in his letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul pours out the gratitude he feels for the faithful Christians there. He even reports that he gives God glory and praise for the wonderful work that they are doing there to advance faith in Jesus.

Paul even elaborates by using specific examples of the good things he has heard about their faith: how they were welcoming and had turned from idle worship to serve the living and true God. Even in the midst of persecution, they had remained faithful and true to their faith in Jesus Christ.

By opening his letter to the Thessalonians in this way, he was able to open their ears to hear what he had to say to him. His genuine thanksgiving for who they were gave his credibility instead of resistance.

Cultivating an attitude of gratitude is important in all that we do and it affects everything we do. It affects how we treat our children and parents and siblings. It affects business deals and neighborly contact. It avoids unnecessary problems and invites a better outcome, especially in the face of disagreement.

Gratitude for God is equally as important. The more gratitude we have for God, the more we are able to see why we have every reason to be grateful. Where humans fail and fall short, God does not. God does not disappoint. Disappointment only comes when we focus our gratitude only to our own merit or that of those who hurt us. God is never a part of that equation.

So where do we start? A good place to start is with a journal. Jot down everything you are thankful for. Jot down even the things you take for granted such as food, a home, family, and clean water. Then jot down the things that you think of throughout the day. You might be amazed at just how many things we can be thankful for each and every day! Use your journal as a prayer of thanksgiving to God and say a prayer of thanks to God for each thing on your list. I know that I am grateful for each one of you here today and your faithfulness to God in Jesus Christ! Amen.

Prayer:

Gracious God,

Thank you! Thank you for this congregation, this place of worship, these wonderful persons here today, and this special day you set apart for time with you. In Jesus name we praise you. Amen.