

Gratitude and Forgiveness

Gratitude is a wonderful condition of the heart. As far as I can see it is one of these truly warm, feel-good attitudes that contain no negative side effects or regrets. It's a close relative of forgiveness in that respect. Since gratitude and forgiveness both have somewhere within their operational structure a strong element of love, and just as love "covers a multitude of sins" so do these precious responses provide a multitude of blessings to both giver and receiver. This holds true to varying degrees even in the secular world, as is self-evident. This is so even though the words of gratitude and forgiveness are often over used and spoken absent of sincerity. Prolonged generosity inevitably converts gratitude into entitlement, which can even devolve into resentment and then into covetousness. Gratitude is thankfulness. A simple thank you as an expression of gratitude is often enough of a response to some favor. However, the term has been so watered down as a rote response to almost anything, that it is now nearly meaningless as an expression of sincere gratitude unless expressed with ever increasing exclamation.

Sincere forgiveness in the secular world is far less prevalent than gratitude. Gratitude involves the receipt of some benefit, which makes that response almost mandatory, superficially at least. But forgiveness involves putting aside an affront or some emotionally or physically hurtful conduct or action by the one to be forgiven. It's human nature to rail against such a response unless some perceived form of compensation or vindictive retribution has been provided in full measure. Exceptions, of course, are to be found among close friends and family, but they merely confirm the rule. Often even retribution is not enough to elicit forgiveness. Torture, murder and even wars have been considered just responses to affronts, rather than simple forgiveness. Probably, as often as not, a false expression of forgiveness has been given by the lips, while the heart continued to seethe with intended revenge as soon as an opportunity was made possible. In this respect, we find a perfect example of false forgiveness followed by an excessive

act of revenge described in Genesis 34, which followed the rape of one of Jacob's daughters. Natural man has not changed at all for the better since that incident. In the world, trespasses are seldom forgotten even if forgiven. This remembrance, this keeping track is such as to place a limit on how many times one is willing to forgive a repeated infraction. With a loved one it can be many times, with a friend perhaps several times. But with an enemy, probably not even once. That would be totally contrary to nature.

In the community of redeemed Christians, things are supposed to be quite different. In the mature Christian's heart, all gratitude belongs to God. But all mankind saved or otherwise, has in his very nature a craving for praise in order to increase his self-esteem, otherwise called pride. The world extols self-esteem. It is advocated from the pulpits and especially from the largest "Christian church" in the U.S. But we are all, everyone, fallen beings, having absolutely no intrinsic goodness. Remember, what Jesus said when the rich young man called Him good Master.

"And behold, one came and said unto Him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And He said unto him, Why callest thou me Good? There is none good but one, that is God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."
(Matthew 19:16, 17).

If we have no goodness within our selves, how can we honestly, in good conscience, feel any pride or accept gratitude to ourselves for anything? If such is aimed toward us, we ought to be obliged to acknowledge, through our lips as well as in our hearts, as being nothing more than conduits through which the Holy Spirit has directed His blessings. If anything good results from anything we do, it is through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, not in any intrinsic good that we possess. Any conclusion different than that becomes the leaven from which a puffing up of pride begins to grow. We must not allow even a speck of this to enter our hearts lest it grows like the mustard seed into its grotesque ugliness where Satan's birds will inevitably begin to gather, as in the parable (Matthew 13:31 and 32).

Regarding this matter of doing good, how can one reconcile this apparent difference between the “good” works of a redeemed person from the good works of the natural, unsaved person? Let’s say that the two of them work side by side equally feeding and clothing the poor, tending to the sick, living clean, honest lives, and achieving the same beneficial results. What is different between them and the effects of their endeavors? On the surface there is no difference; as far as the world is concerned, the same works yield the same results. But what is behind these works in the heart of the worker? First, in the heart of even the atheist or agnostic there is a God given conscience, which is placed in the hearts of all mankind. It may manifest as a civic duty or a form of social obligation felt toward the less fortunate. Such good works may also be preformed as a form of posturing for the purpose of generating praise or position. Whatever the motive, it is strictly earth-bound, and earth-centered, and wholly humanistic. They do not acknowledge God, and God does not recognize them or their works. Then there are those who believe there is a god or a force of some kind. Many of these persons see good works as a way to impress their god and score “brownie points,” believing that good works can open the gates of whatever heaven is, if their good works can on balance score higher than their “bad works.” They may even sincerely think that they believe in the Creator God, but unless the evidential basis of that belief is the Holy Bible with Jesus as the Cornerstone, that belief is fatally flawed.

Ideally, these same works provided by the redeemed Christian believers are motivated by a different and supernatural dynamic, namely gratitude. It is gratitude to our Creator God, the Triune Godhead of which Jesus is an integral part. This gratitude stems from the blessed grace of salvation and eternal life received through faith in Jesus and His work on the cross. That gratitude is a moment-by-moment, day-by-day continuous and eternal gratitude, which fills the heart and continually seeks opportunities to manifest itself in ways pleasing to God. Such works are never considered obligatory, or self-benefiting. They are the outflowings of divine love imparted to the saved soul by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If this aspect of Christian behavior seems to you to be idealistic, you are right, it is. But it should be the achievable goal of every faithful, fruitful believer. The degree, to which it will be achieved, is proportioned to how much

of the world is removed from the heart's desires and how much of this is replaced by God's Word and a willingness to submit to it.

The conscience is an inherent supernatural implant placed in the hearts of all mankind. I wonder how the atheists, when they recognize they have the sense of right and wrong, can rationalize it as having resulted from any evolutionary process. It is totally contrary to any random selection or survival-of-the-fittest scenario.

All cultures and religions have laws and morals, which at least early on, are patterned after the 10 commandments. These are all the result of governmentally codifying, in some form, what God places in every heart. However, man's conscience becomes seared and callused to varying degrees as these cultures atrophy, as they all do. Look at one hundred years ago in this country. It would have been "unconscionable" to consider abortion to be a moral or legal right, along with the many perversions, which today are considered as perfectly normal, legal and even taught in schools as simply alternative life styles. This moral decay was the condition of God's people of Israel, when they sacrificially roasted their babies in the red-hot bronze arms of the pagan god Baal, just before God destroyed the nation. Thus the seared consciences are capable of accepting and ever glorifying and worshiping actions abominable to our Creator God, as is evidenced almost everywhere we look today.

So what is the point of all of this? Gratitude and forgiveness are characteristics indigenous to every human soul to various degrees. The purity and quality of these God-given qualities have tended to deteriorate and become manipulative the further man has drifted from the One true God. Although they remain in the secular culture, they no longer have the spiritual benefits to the soul that they should have. In His teachings, Jesus brought back into conscious understanding the true godly meanings of gratitude and forgiveness. Through God's most precious and profound gift, His grace of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, He endowed its recipients with new hearts capable of understanding and applying these attributes in accordance with His way. Those who are truly redeemed have an obligation, as evidence of their saved status, to apply most

vigorously and sincerely what Jesus taught. While it's obligatory as evidence, the true Christian believer will never consider it an obligation, but instead a precious privilege, to give all thanks and gratitude to God and to sincerely forgive all others as our Lord said we should.