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The Servant of the Gospel, Part 2

Years ago, Chuck Swindoll said these words: “The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company... a church... a home. In summary, “There are few things more important than attitude.”

Whether you agree with Chuck Swindoll or not, I think you would all agree that one of the most important attitude’s by which the child of God could ever be characterized is that of gratitude! It has been said that, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all of the others.” And that rightly is the case, for lying at the heart of Christian gratitude is expressed-love.

And that is why we are not surprised to find that gratitude is one of the marks of The Servant of the Gospel. As Paul is writing this epistle to the Romans and therefore is introducing himself to them. We learn not only of The Gospel he preached,¹ but also the characteristics which made him a faithful servant of the Gospel.²

¹ Compare Romans 1:1-7

² Compare Romans 1:8-16

The Importance of Gratitude

Now, last time we looked at Paul's service and saw that he was mindful that in and through all things he was a priest before God and so one who lived to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. This morning we turn our focus to His Gratitude. Notice, the importance of gratitude.

Romans 1:8, "first, I thank my God."

Paul's usage of the word "first" could indicate that Paul was about to make a list. Yet since Paul gives no "second," it is best to take this as, "of most importance," "of top priority." From this we see where thanksgiving/gratitude ranked in Paul's life; it was one of his top priorities. Now this is striking. When you and I realize the rich and deep statements Paul is about to make in this letter, and then see that all of these are placed second to Paul's expression of gratitude we should be amazed at the PRIORITY Paul attached to being grateful as a servant of the Gospel.

From Paul's example we conclude that gratitude is one of the most important virtues that could be named amongst a people of God! And that's exactly right THE mark of unbelief in Scripture is an ungrateful disposition. Speaking of the essence of unbelief, Paul wrote of the non-believer:

Romans 1:2, "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks..."

In fact, gratitude is so important to God that He has gone on record as saying that a thankful disposition is HIS will for His children.

1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

And thus we read that it was on account of their ingratitude that Israel was brought to its lowest point in the wilderness.

Psalms 106:25-26, "But [they- Israel] grumbled in their tents; they did not listen to the voice of the Lord. Therefore He swore to them, that He would cast them down in the wilderness."

In contrast, gratitude sanctifies every blessing.

1 Timothy 4:4-5, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer."

The Recipient of Paul's Gratitude

Thus when we come to our passage where Paul is presenting himself to the Romans as a model for what constitutes a Servant of the Gospel, we ought not to be surprised that gratitude was one of Paul's Top Priorities! With that, notice the object or "recipient" of Paul's gratitude.

Romans 1:8, "first, I thank my God."

God was the One who received the thanks of Paul- and this is the way it should ALWAYS be. Many of us are quick to say "Thank you" for a job well-done. And while there is nothing wrong with this- and certainly this is far more preferable than a grumbling attitude- we must make sure it doesn't end here. The ULTIMATE RECIPIENT of our gratitude must be God- and not just in word, but in our hearts! For certainly everything that ever could be a cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving is the result of God's gracious work in our lives.

James 1:16-17, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow."

Now having said this we note that it is not just "God" who is the recipient of Paul's thanks here. Notice it is "MY God." This is an incredible statement. In Paul's day, no pagan would have made such a statement, nor would most Jews have referred to God with a personal pronoun. Yet to Paul, God is not a philosophical abstract. Rather God is his beloved Savior and close friend.

The object of Paul's faith and love the One to whom he owed everything!

! Corinthians 15:9-10a, "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am..."

Thus we learn 2 things about the servant of the gospel's gratitude here:

1. His gratitude and thanksgiving was given primarily to God!
2. And far from being a cold exercise wherein he bowed before an impersonal god/force and expressed dutiful thanks, his GRATITUDE is given to his PERSONAL God and Savior who loved him and gave Himself up for him!

The Path of Gratitude

Romans 1:8, "first, I thank my God through Jesus Christ."

As it is through Christ that we receive God's grace (v. 5), so it is through Christ that God receives our gratitude. In fact reflected here is the mediation of Christ!

! Timothy 2:5, "There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."
John 14:6, "...No one comes to the Father, but through Me."

Hebrews 13:15, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."

Whether you realize it or not, this is a huge point. There has been a trend in Christianity to speak of standing "naked before God." Now insofar as this implies standing before God without pretense or delusion, the expression is fine. But like any expression coined to represent a movement, this is fraught with misunderstanding and the potential for great harm.

Listen! As long as you are a member of the household of God, you always will need a Mediator. Never will you stand naked before God... unclothed... just you and the Lord. NO! We always will need a Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, both now and in glory. Accordingly, when we enter into the presence of God and voice our gratitude, we come ever mindful that it only is on the basis of Christ's merits. And so we trust/rely upon Him as the ground of our acceptance. See, without Christ, God would not hear us.

Isaiah 59:1-2, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear."

But in Christ, our praises of thanksgiving are received by God.

1 Peter 2:4-5, "And coming to Him as to a living stone... you also, as living stones are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

2 Corinthians 1:20, "For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us."

And that is why the Christian is able to.

Hebrews 4:16, "...draw near with confidence to the throne of grace..."

Romans 8:15, "Abba, Father."

Our gratitude is not to be given "willy-nilly." We must understand that the only reason God receives our gratitude is because of...

- Jesus Christ.
- His death on the cross.
- His suffering and pain!
- His mediatorial work on our behalf!

And nothing else- not our sincerity, our righteousness, our good intentions! Thus as we exercise a heart of gratitude we must do so ever mindful of the cross- it is through Christ that we give thanks!

Its Occasion

Romans 1:8, "first, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all."

If you do a study on gratitude and the Christian you will find that a major source of the thanksgiving rendered to the Lord in Scripture is NOT on account of a personal victory or blessing, BUT because of the working of God in and through the lives of other people! See...

- The kingdom of God is "other-centered."
- Because God has loved His bride- the body of Christ- and has brought each of us into "the beloved," God expects us to love and care for the body; for He does!

And thus, rarely if ever do you find in Scripture a request for prayer on behalf of the individual alone (that is, *pray for my back that I might be able to run again; pray for my test that I might get a good grade*); when there is the request for personal prayer, it always is so that the person might better serve God or the brethren.

Again, Christianity is an "other-centered" religion. Do a study sometime of the "one another" passages of Scripture. You will discover numerous commands whereby we are called to love, greet, pray, care, serve, bear, admonish, be devoted to, give preference to, be kind to, etc. one another. The word of God is saturated with such an emphasis. The end of all gifts and talents is the building up of the body of Christ.³ That which was deemed a true tragedy in Paul's life was not the suffering he endured or a failed hope or dream, but a people of God being uncared for and left to themselves.⁴

And that is why in this text, when Paul went about expressing gratitude to God, the occasion revolved not around

³ Compare 1 Corinthians 12:7; and 1 Peter 4:10

⁴ Compare 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2

a personal victory or benefit, but God's working in and through the Romans. Notice:

Romans 1:8, "because your faith is being proclaimed."

This is not referring to the INITIAL trust in Christ that brings salvation, but to the PERSEVERING trust that brings spiritual strength and growth. That is what was circulating from church to church in the ancient world when it came to the Romans! It is very similar to what Paul said in relation to the Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 1:8-9, "...in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report... how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God."

Paul was thankful for the faith of the Roman Christians and the fact that it was being proclaimed or declared.

Romans 1:8, "throughout the whole world."

This obviously doesn't mean that the testimony of the Christians at Rome at that time was known to every person under heaven. Rather Paul is saying that the news of their faith had been diffused throughout the Christian world- if not the Roman world. In fact according to Suetonius⁵ in A.D. 49, Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because it was believed that they were followers of someone named Chrestus (a variant spelling of Christ) this would coincide with the expulsion that we read about in Acts 18:2. Apparently the testimony of Jewish Christians had so incited the non-believing Jews that the turmoil threatened the peace of the whole city!!

Thus, the believers at Rome had a powerful testimony not only in the city itself, but throughout the Roman world. And it was this that served as the OCCASION for Paul's gratitude, God's Kingdom Work in and through the lives of the Romans. From this we see the nature of "The Gratitude" of the Servant of the Gospel. It is...

- Of utmost importance.
- To be expressed to our PERSONAL God and Savior who loves us, and gave Himself up for us!
- Given on the basis of the Cross of Christ- "through Jesus Christ."
- Expressed for God's kingdom work in this world!

And yet I ask you, "Where are the Praises and Thanksgiving today?" When you look out over Christendom you largely...

- SEE fear and worry of where the world is going.
- HEAR complaints and woes over the present evil age. Complaints over...
 - Evil leaders.
 - Immoral laws.
 - The president.
 - Al Qaeda.
 - Our financial future.
- FEEL and can identify with this anguish and doubt.

And yet we are so quick to forget that the World which housed the Apostolic church and in which Christ lived and served was many times and in many ways more evil and more vile than ours! And yet these same Christians were commanded to

Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

⁵ The Twelve Caesars, p. 202.

Romans 5:3a, "...exult in our tribulations..."

1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Now we must see that this is not situation-specific. On the contrary, even in difficult situations the Servant of the Gospel is to be characterized by gratitude. In fact, would you notice?

The Context of Romans

If you read the book of Acts and place the writing of this epistle into its context, what you discover is amazing...

- We know that during Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey (Acts 19:21), Paul began speaking of a desire to go to Rome.
- And yet by Acts 20 we discover that Paul knew that on the horizon of his life something dreadful was going to happen...
- Acts 20:22-23: "And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me."

In fact, when Paul finally arrived in Palestine we read of a prophet coming to Paul and telling him that he would be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles⁶ which would have been understood to have meant his death. Well, much of Paul's concern came to pass. We read about it in...

Acts 21:30-31, "And all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together; and taking hold of Paul, they dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. And while they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion."

In the history that I just gave you, where was Paul when he wrote this letter to the Romans?

Romans 15:25, "But now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints."

Paul wrote this letter from Corinth on his way to Jerusalem to fulfill the task given to him in Acts 19:21. Which means that at the writing of this epistle, Paul was aware that...

- NOT ONLY were the Jews plotting to kill him (Acts 20:3).
- BUT THAT imprisonment and possible death awaited him in Jerusalem.

Now I don't know about you, but if I knew that imprisonment and death were hovering on the horizon of my life, I'm not too sure that...

- "Gratitude" would be that which would characterize my life.
- I'd be praying (Romans 1: 10-11) for God to allow me to minister to a church to which I'd yet to come.
- I'd continue the ministry to which I had been called.

Rather, I'm quite sure that I'd be self-absorbed, concerned about my life and possible death, burdened, heavy, and most likely depressed. And yet such was not the case in Paul's life. Gratitude flowed from the lips of Paul because as a true Servant of the Gospel that which was most important was NOT his...

⁶ Compare Acts 21:11-12

- Welfare.
- Future.
- Comfort.
- Support.

BUT the glory of God (again, Paul was a priest, v. 9) and so the advancement of God's kingdom! And this must be the case in our lives as servants of the gospel!

Now don't misunderstand...

- It is not wrong to be concerned about the times we live in- we are to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-14)!
- What is wrong is when this concern...
 - Consumes us.
 - Causes us to take our eyes off of God and His kingdom.
 - Robs us of the Disposition of gratitude that must characterize us as Servants of the Gospel!

Indeed, "Where have all the grateful Servants of the Gospel gone?" Let me be a little strong here...

- They left when the church and her people shifted their primary focus from God and placed it on themselves (their wants, desires, and needs)!
- Truly the Bible tells us that the thankless person is the self-absorbed person...
- One of the marks of the end times is that the church will be filled with people who

2 Timothy 3:2, "As such, they will be, "...lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful..."

From this we conclude that thankful Christians have disappeared NOT because our world is so bad, BUT because we are so self-absorbed! It's hard to say "Thank You" when YOUR personal desires aren't met! Truly, if we are to be faithful Servants of the Gospel, we must recapture the disposition of gratitude which...

- Characterized Paul's ministry.
- Characterized the Apostolic ministry.
- And MUST characterize every Servant of the Gospel!

And yet genuinely grateful hearts aren't something we just "click on." So, how do we cultivate a grateful heart and so an "other-centered" living? Let me give you four suggestions (which certainly are not exhaustive). First be real with God.⁷

1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

If you struggle with an ungrateful heart, confess this to God!

- Confess your self-centeredness.
- Confess your ungratefulness.
- Pour your heart out before Him.

Secondly, having confessed this, ask God to change and mold you into a Grateful Christian.

⁷ Compare 1 John 1:9

- Die to self (Luke 9:23) and so Exalt God (Genesis 50:20).
- Luke 9:23: “And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’”

We have seen that one of the enemies of a grateful heart in the life of a Christian is when we exalt ourselves- our needs and desires- over God. Truly and in contrast, if we are going to cultivate a thankful disposition, we must die to ourselves; we must see who we truly are AND who God is!!! Accordingly, we must...

- Take up our cross- which being a symbol of execution means that we willingly forfeit our...
 - Wants.
 - Desires.
 - Needs.
 - Future.
 - Family.
 - Welfare.
- And then follow God trusting Him to work out His will in our lives in His time! Recall Joseph’s words to his brothers...

Genesis 50:20, “And as for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

Now you say, “But I’m so sinful. I can’t take up the cross!” First off realize that Christ gave this calling NOT to unregenerate men with the intention that the law would lead them to salvation. Rather, He gave this command to His followers! Accordingly, this is a charge resting upon each of us upon salvation! Yet indeed we are sinful and therefore will find that taking up our cross will involve a battle against the flesh. Accordingly, we conclude that the call to “take up our cross” is a call at minimum to long for and pray for an “other-centered” existence! The more “other-centered” we become, the more that gratitude will characterize our living.

Thirdly, submit to the Providence of God.

Romans 8:28, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.”

Has this verse become trite to you? Or do you really believe this? See, one of the reasons gratitude is missing from the hearts and lives of God’s people is that we gaze upon the world with finite eyes. In the words of Samuel, “God sees not as man sees” (1 Samuel 16:7b). We really don’t believe that “behind every frowning providence there lies a smiling face!”⁸ I love the words of J. R. Miller (1886):

“Health is supposed to be better than sickness, but there comes a time when God's kindness will be most wisely shown by denying us health. He never takes pleasure in causing us to suffer; He is touched by our sorrows. Yet He loves us too well, to give us things that would harm us, or to spare us the trial that is needful for our spiritual good. It will be seen in the end, that many of the very richest blessings of all our lives have come to us through God's denials, His withholdings, or His shattering of our hopes and joys.

“We should never forget that the object of all of God's dealings with His children is to sanctify us, and make us vessels fit for His use. To this high and glorious end, our present pleasure and gratification must oft-times be sacrificed. This is the true key to all the mysteries of Providence. Anything that hinders entire consecration to Christ, is working us harm; and though it be our tenderest joy, it is best that it be taken away.”⁹

⁸ Red Trinity Hymnal #128.

⁹ From a sermon title “Silent Times.”

Oh brother or sister, come to accept God's providence, and gratitude will become the state in which you live!

Fourthly, embrace the cross.

Galatians 6:14, "But may it never be that I should boast [in the Bible to boast is to glory, exalt, or praise. It's an intensive form of gratitude], except in the cross of our Lord Jesus."

Truly, if we are going to be characterized by grace and thanksgiving, we must embrace the cross. This means that we must embrace its glory:

- We must never stop delighting and rejoicing over the peace we have received with God through it.
- We must never allow the cross to become common-place and boring.
- We must become intimately aware of the Grace which is ours by it.
- We must make it our constant boast.
- We must always approach it afresh and anew.

But we must also embrace its shame:

- There's going to be persecution because of the cross.

2 Timothy 3:12, "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

There is going to be pain and heart-ache because of the cross. Samuel Rutherford put it this way: "If the work were of men, the world would set their shoulders to yours..."¹⁰ Indeed, the Cross will bring much shame!

But, when we accept and embrace it, its Glory as well as its Shame, then will our hearts be characterized by thankfulness, even in the most difficult trial!

1 Peter 1:6, "In this you greatly rejoice [this an intensive form of thanksgiving], even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials..."

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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<http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on October 18, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.

¹⁰ *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, p. 81.