

Gratitude vs. Greed

Christmas Messages (Part 23)

Luke 1:31-49 12/18/2021

Why do people feel depressed after the holidays, or on the last day of a vacation, or crave more food even after they have eaten enough? The answer will turn that depression and emptiness into fullness and joy.

Introduction

What do you do when you open a present and it's not what you wanted? What's the right way to respond—the godly way? What's the wrong way to respond? Would it be fair to say the right response is gratitude and the wrong response is some form of greed? It's gratitude vs. greed—that's what will decide if you're happy or unhappy when you receive a gift.

And that applies even if it's a gift you did want. If your heart is controlled by greed instead of gratitude, you'll be unhappy even when you get something you wanted, because you'll just want more. Greed is at the core of all discontent. When you have anxiety on the last day of a really great vacation because it's almost over—that's greed, right? Instead of being grateful for all the pleasures you've enjoyed on the vacation, you're just greedy for more. This is why kids tend to get irritable or depressed on Christmas afternoon. You say, "You have all these toys—why are you unhappy? Why can't you just be thankful for all the gifts?" The reason is simple—it's impossible to be greedy and grateful at the same time. Every time you get a gift, your response will depend on which of those two comes out on top. There is a constant war that rages in every heart between gratitude and greed. And you can tell which side is winning that war by the way you respond to gifts—especially when it's not the gift you wanted.

Mary's Example

One of the most profound examples of what a grateful heart looks like is Mary, when the angel told her what was going to happen. There's hardly a Christmas that goes by when we don't stop at some point and imagine what it was like for Mary. She's a young girl, marriageable age, and like every other young person she no doubt had hopes and dreams—some kind of idea of what she wanted her immediate future to be like. But then an angel comes and lets her know that her life as she knew it was over.

Luke 1:31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

He goes on to describe all these amazing things about how the child will reign over Israel forever in an eternal kingdom and all the rest. He gets done with all that, and look what she's still stuck on:

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

"Could you go back to the part about me getting pregnant, because ... I'm not married." I don't blame her. There had been special people born before, but always in the normal way—a man and a woman. Imagine being a young woman—probably a teenager—and being told by an angel that you're going to be pregnant. "Could you expand on that a little?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

"So ... no man involved?" Put yourself in her shoes. What will life be like if you get pregnant right now, before you're married? A teen pregnancy in our culture is one thing. But to be an unwed, pregnant Jewish girl in ancient Israel—your life is over. What are you going to tell your parents? How are you going to explain it to your fiancé? And the legal authorities who might stone you to death? "Oh, this? Yeah—that's from the Holy Spirit." You might believe it because you saw the angel (and you know you're a virgin), but unless God sends angels to everyone else in the village, what are you going to say?

And sure enough, when Joseph finds out, he decides to break it off. He's going to keep it quiet, so maybe you won't get stoned to death. But how are you going to make it in that world as a single mom? Not to mention the heartbreak of your fiancé—the man you thought you were going to live happily ever after with—just kicked you to the curb. You'll probably never be married now. Whatever her hopes and dreams had been, they're all gone now.

So how does Mary respond? She goes to see Elizabeth and says this:

46 And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name."

All she has in her near future is hardship, suffering, poverty, and shame. Future generations will call her blessed, but how many teens do you know that concern themselves with future generations? Most teens can't really think beyond about age 30, if that far. How many teens do you know who would be thrilled to find out that the rest of their life would be really hard, but future generations would call her blessed?

How did Mary have such an amazing response? It's very simple: she opted for gratitude instead of greed. Greed would look only at what she lost and the life she had hoped for and would be unhappy and empty. Gratitude focuses on what was given, not on what wasn't given and results in fullness and joy. I made an effort to illustrate that point in a scene in *Escape from Paradise* where Adam is explaining to Abigail how she can reduce her cravings for fruit (which represents sin in the book).

He drew a small cottage piece from the pack. He ran a string through it and placed it over her head. Abigail inspected the wooden pendant. "It's a carving," she mused, running her finger over its contours. "Such detail. Who carved this? You can even see the tiny muscles straining in the child's arms." "It's a father and daughter. The box at her feet is a gift she just opened." "And she's squeezing her father in gratitude," Abigail said, still marveling at the statuette. "What a beautiful piece. Thank you." Breaking from her fixation on the pendant, she looked again at Adam. "But how does this help me turn off my cravings?" "I'll ask you the question Charles asked when he gave it to me. Why isn't the girl crying?" "Crying? Why would she? She just received a precious gift." "One gift. But how many gifts has she not received?" "What do you mean? There are millions of things she didn't receive." "Exactly. So how can she be so happy while being deprived of a million good gifts?" Abigail nodded slowly. "Because ... her attention isn't on any of the things she *didn't* receive—only on what she did receive." Abigail studied the piece again. Something inside her melted at the touching display of happy thankfulness between daughter and father. It made her wish she was that little girl. Adam took the piece from her fingers and turned it over. "There's an inscription on the bottom." Squinting, she struggled to make out the miniscule print. "Si ... Silence greed with ... gratitude."

I read that to you because that's exactly what Mary did. Whatever ideas she had in mind for what gifts she wanted from God in life, he gave her a very different gift. And instead of focusing on what he didn't give her, she focused on what he did give her and it filled her with joy. And so instead of a bunch of "woe is me" and grumbling and self-pity, we get the Magnificat.

Gratitude when the Gift Is Complete

Now, everything I have said so far is basic, and probably none of that is new for you. But let me add one more perspective on this that, at least for me, really is new. I've been learning so much about gratitude in recent years, and what I learned most recently is the concept of letting the moment of completion

trigger special gratitude. Here's what I mean by that: When God gives you a gift, you don't know the extent of that gift until it's complete—until you have the whole thing. Josiah wanted to go to college, God granted that desire as a gift of love to Josiah, and right now Josiah is in the middle of receiving that gift. But if you ask Josiah to describe that gift, he won't be able to until the end of next summer at the soonest, because that's when he's set to graduate. Part of the gift is still future, and Josiah doesn't know what the remaining part of it will be. When I say we should let the completion of a gift trigger special gratitude, what I mean is it's good for Josiah to be grateful the whole time he's in school, but the time of graduation should trigger a special moment of gratitude because that's when that gift is completed and he can look back on the full gift. Any sooner and he doesn't have the full scope of the gift in mind; any later and it wouldn't be as fresh in his memory, so while it's good for him to be grateful his whole life for that gift, the most ideal moment for gratitude would be right at the time of completion.

The problem is, when greed enters the picture, we tend to see the moment of completion as nothing but a loss. If you really enjoy college, a greedy heart may see graduation as a loss, because now that gift is over. Now, that might sound a little farfetched (especially if you're like me and hated school). But it's not farfetched at all when you apply it to other gifts. For example, a wonderful vacation. Most people feel depressed on the last day of a great vacation. Why? Greed—they want more. So what's the solution? The solution is to see the last day of vacation as the completion of God's gift. And it's at the moment of completion that is the ideal time to be grateful. It's in the final moment of your vacation that God puts a bow on that gift, and for the first time you're able to see the whole gift. If you focus on all the enjoyment you've had in that vacation, all the good food, the fun things, the beautiful sights, the rest and relaxation, enjoyment of family—gather it all in and let your heart sing in gratitude in that moment. Do that, and you'll be happy and full instead of depressed and empty.

The thing that first woke me up to this idea is Nancy Demoss's book on gratitude, where she tells the story of a teenage girl who was killed in a car accident, and when the police came and notified the family, the first thing the dad did was gather the whole family in the living room and give thanks for the 17 years they had her. It struck me because when I suffer a loss, in my best moments, I'll thank God for his purposes in taking that thing away, but it usually doesn't occur to me in that moment to be grateful for the span of time God did let me have that gift. If a loved one dies, that marks the completion of the gift of that loved one's involvement in your life. God gives us countless temporal gifts in this life. But temporal gifts are, by definition, temporary. They are like Josiah's college experience—they have a beginning point and an end point. And while it's perfectly appropriate to mourn a major loss (especially the loss of a loved one), it's also fitting to take that moment to foster gratitude for the fullness of that gift, now that you know the ending point of it.

Isn't that what Job did? It was after he lost everything that he said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Why did he mention the giving part at the moment when everything was taken away? It's because it was in the moment of loss that Job was reminded that the things that were taken away were first given. They were gifts that had a beginning point and an end point.

He understood that the coming and going of gifts is the natural rhythm of life. Temporal gifts are not permanent gifts. Just like your college experience, they have an end date, and it's on that date that you find out for the first time the extent of the gift. So did Job mourn his losses? Yes. But he also blessed God (just like Mary) because he saw those losses as simply the ending point of gifts he had received from God. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, and you never know the extent of what he has given until he takes it away.

When I first got to thinking about this principle, I applied it to the big losses in my life (like the loss of my ministry and career several years ago). But recently I've been seeing the importance of this in small things. Now this is something that comes into play in my life every day.

Practical Applications

One example is with food. I have a serious eating disorder. I always want more food after eating a meal—always. If I didn't weigh out my meals and eat only that, if I just ate until I felt satisfied, I would

weigh 500 pounds. I always want more food. But the principle has really helped me. Now, I finish a meal, and when I have that impulse of wanting more, I use that as a reminder—the end of that meal was the completing of God’s gift. So now isn’t the time to think about more food. Now is the time to think back on the enjoyment of the food God just gave me and be thankful for it. It sounds simple, but for me it’s been a game changer.

I don’t know which parts of your life might need this. Most of you probably don’t have the same eating disorder I have, but you might have some other gratitude disorder. It might be when the gift of the weekend is over and you have to go back to work. When the weekend is over, that’s the moment to step back and recall the whole, full, completed gift of that weekend—the pleasures, the rest, the freedom—whatever it is you like about weekends, and be thankful. When we’re bummed about going back to work on Monday it’s because we’re just like children who are irritable after opening a whole bunch of presents. We’re operating on greed instead of gratitude. We’re greedy for more weekend.

For someone else, it might be that birthday you don’t want to admit you’re having. Some phase of your life is over, and you weren’t ready for it to be over. Instead of getting depressed when you turn 30 or 40 or whatever, to take that moment to gather in all the blessedness of that past decade and be grateful for it.

And Christmas time is a great time to teach this to our kids and grandkids. After the opening of presents is over, maybe take a moment to put them all in a pile and express gratitude. Recall all the moments of laughter and the smiles and feelings (“What was your favorite part? Remember when your sister opened that gift and was so surprised? I love the part where we were all laughing ...” Now that this gift from God of Christmas morning is complete, step back, take it all in, and revel in gratitude to God and the enjoyment of his kindness.

I’m glad you all came tonight. I don’t know what smiles and laughter and delightful moments the Lord has in store for us over the next hour or two, but we’ll know in an hour or two, and that will be the moment most fitting for us to be happy in the Lord for the gift and express our thanks.