



A Thanksgiving Reflection: “Thanks Are the Highest Form of Thought”

My father once told me a story about when he was a boy. He said there was a certain man who every now and again would visit his family and give him 10 cents for an ice cream soda each time. Well, one day this fellow came ‘a callin’, but for some reason, on this occasion the dime wasn’t offered. Being a little tyke who had become accustomed to the gift, my dad asked, “Where’s my 10 cents?”

He never got that dime again.

The man taught my father a moral lesson: Don’t develop a spirit of entitlement. It’s one that, lamentably, we so often forget to teach today.

G.K. Chesterton once said, “Thanks are the highest form of thought.” I do believe he was correct, but why exactly is this so? Let’s explore the mindset of gratitude.

An ungrateful heart is an ugly thing. Just think about a spoiled brat who throws a tantrum when not given something he really wants. Or think about people who grow up — but don’t grow out of that state. It may be that person for whom you do a favor who then can’t even manage a “thank you”; or someone who, even though you’ve done him innumerable good turns, won’t lift a finger to reciprocate when you’re in need. We also see this attitude in political protests such as the Occupy Wall Street movement; its members operate under an unabashed assumption that they have a right to the fruits of others’ labors. This, mind you, makes a perversion of charity. For charitable practice is only truly beautiful when the largesse is freely given — and gratefully accepted.

Clearly, such people believe they’re owed something. It reminds me of a man I knew who was working independent-contractor status at a certain establishment and used its facilities without paying the place its rental fees, which were relatively minor. His response upon being caught was, “I deserve it [the





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stolen percentage].” Why? He didn’t elaborate.

This brings me to something else Chesterton said: “Goods look a lot better when they come wrapped as gifts.” The just-mentioned covetous man clearly didn’t “see the wrapping.” But how can we learn to do so naturally and avoid his lower form of thought?

Perspective always helps, of course. We could note that relative to virtually all the people who ever trod this blue orb, we live opulent lifestyles. We don’t slave away under a burning sun as a medieval serf did, or many still do today, for subsistence wages. We don’t live off blood soup like a perpetually hungry Spartan boy. Instead, our supermarkets offer thousands of delights from the world over at quite manageable prices. Moreover, even most “poor” among us have luxuries — TVs, cellphones, cars, refrigerators, toilets, hot and cold running water, washing machines, etc. — of which even a perfumed 18th-century English lord couldn’t dream. And the kicker is that our forefathers did most of the heavy lifting. Thanks to them, it can be said that, relatively speaking, most of us Westerners are born with silver spoons in our mouths.

Yet, while this perspective helps immensely, it doesn’t truly illuminate the matter. I mean, sure, it may inspire some to kiss American terra firma, but it doesn’t explain how the medieval serf could be thankful or how the woman working an Indochinese rice paddy could be so today.

This is where the Christian worldview comes into play. I was at a gathering once, and a certain man got testy during a religious debate and wanted to lash out. He opined that “Catholicism is a religion for losers.” But here’s the thing.

He was right.

But the point is that we’re all losers.

In that we’re all sinners.

And this message is, I believe, what bothered this man. Being a modernist, he subscribed to the god-within, I’m-okay-you’re-okay, feel-good, designer-religion mentality. And “sin” is such an outdated concept. With relativism carrying the day, such a thing is just a matter of taste, don’tcha’ know?

Now, the first thing I should say about the tenet of Christianity in question here is that it’s true. But as is usually the case with Truth, it’s also utilitarian. And insofar as gratitude goes, it flows from this knowledge of our fallen state. When I understand that I truly am a sinner, I realize I deserve nothing but damnation. But another message of Christianity is that I don’t have to suffer such a fate because God is merciful. And He is generous, too, so much so that he lavishes His bounty upon me.

This reminds me of the day I was sitting in my recliner about to enjoy a perfectly ripened peach. I looked at this miracle of creation and thought to myself, “Imagine, it began as one microscopic cell and then, fed by water, sunlight and nutrients, grew into this delicious fruit. And while the tree that bore it took about six years to mature and the peach itself took months to grow to size, I was going to gobble it down in minutes. I truly felt unworthy of it.

When you recognize your sinfulness, you realize that everything is icing on the cake. It is then that the wrapping is always the first thing you see. This is one of the secrets of happiness, too, because you receive presents every single day. You’re always getting more than you deserve.

In contrast, the relativistic modern who sees no objective standard for morality with which to measure himself has only his own feelings to use as such a yardstick. But then it becomes very easy to canonize — or even deify — yourself. For how sinful will you seem when you are your own moral standard? It’s



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hard to not be in conformity with yourself.

From this is born ingratitude. From it is born envy. From it is born covetousness. After all, such a sinless being is entitled to all good things. Moreover, other people can never measure up to his moral yardstick the way he can, since it is a reflection of him and they are not. So why should he be denied what these lesser mortals enjoy? What have they got that he hasn't — except an excessive number of flaws?

Obviously, going through life believing you're denied what you're owed — and that others get your piece of the pie — yields anger and unhappiness. It's an example of being oppressed by your own attitude.

Then there is another problem with this secular mindset. It's easy for all of us to become selfish for the simple reason that we have a self. And how can this be combated? It's easier to do if you can ponder a perspective higher than your own, namely God's. After all, God doesn't look down on the seven billion of us and say, "Well, the happiness, finances and success of Jerry there in Boise, Idaho, are more important than anyone else's." And when we realize that the *highest* perspective deems everyone else's happiness as important as ours, it's easier to be happy for others' success. It's easier to view our fellow man in the way Jesus meant when He said, "He who does the will of my Father in Heaven is my mother and my brother."

So have a very happy Thanksgiving. And ponder the peach. Because when we feel worthy of the peach, it is not the highest form of thought.

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