

Giving Thanks
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Oh, that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men. (Ps. 107:15)

Have you ever noticed that some people seem to recognize more things to be grateful for in their lives than others? It is not primarily caused by having more good events occurring for those people. The story of the ten lepers being healed by the Lord had the same miracle occur for them all, but only one returned to thank Him. The other nine certainly noticed the miracle of their healing. What was going on in their minds that they did not return to Jesus to thank Him?

A person's thankfulness depends significantly on his or her state of mind prior to and at the time an event occurs. Four people can receive exactly the same benefit; one could be too busy focusing on some other aspect of life to even notice its occurrence, a second could be so frustrated and angry that it hadn't occurred already that he is still resentful as he receives what he believes is long over-due him, and the third could feel discouraged or depressed because he was so needy and a fourth could feel a deep sense of gratitude. The blessing could be the same, the reactions would be quite different.

We are not told what was happening in the minds of the nine lepers who were healed but did not return to the Lord. Perhaps they were so caught up in the need to show themselves to the priest, as Jesus had directed them, and be declared clean and able to return to normal society that nothing else entered their minds. As it were, although a wonderful miracle had occurred in their lives, they were so focused on the next thing that they did not make time to return to the Lord to give thanks. Sadly, perhaps some of them was already thinking of who they wanted to repay for mistreatment during their time of leprosy.

Another example of thankfulness is given in a memorable experience from the teachings for the New Church about a man who died and went to the life after. At first the man was filled with concern about his welfare because he could no longer take care of himself. The angels told him that after death, the Lord provides directly for each person's needs. The angels then helped the man in many ways, carefully serving each of his needs. When this man then had time by himself to think, his mind turned to thoughts of gratitude and wondered how he could repay the great kindness that had been shown to him. He could have been resentful for no longer being in the world. He could have been focusing still on the things that he had left behind. But instead he was filled with a deep sense of gratitude and his thoughts turned to how he could express that gratitude. We are told that this indicated that the man was ready to be lifted almost immediately into heaven (*Arcana Caelestia* 318).

People have made special opportunities for expressing thanksgiving or gratefulness thorough out history. They have felt grateful and have wanted to express this gratitude in some way. How often do you feel gratitude toward the Lord? We can say a blessing at mealtimes and prayers at other times, but how often do we feel grateful? Do you feel grateful when it comes time to celebrate Thanksgiving? For some people Thanksgiving is just that day to eat a big meal and perhaps watch a lot of football on the television. Listen and you might hear that some people don't seem to even associate the day with thanks. They call it "Turkey day."

The story in Luke clearly points out that it was a Samaritan who returned to Jesus loudly glorifying God and who fell in humble acknowledgment at His feet giving Him thanks. While the teachings for the New Church do not directly explain this element of the miracle, it is interesting to reflect that perhaps it was something in the Samaritan's background that left him less likely to take a miracle for granted. Something led him to respond with a deep gratitude for his healing.

Does the Lord tell us that we should be grateful? The teachings for the New Church do indeed say that the Lord demands thanksgiving from us (*Arcana Coelestia* 5957). He does so not for His own sake, but for ours. What if we do not feel grateful? Can we make ourselves feel grateful? No, not really. We have control, to an extent over our thoughts. We can control our actions. But we cannot directly control our feelings. Just as we cannot successfully make ourselves feel loving when we do not, so also, we cannot make ourselves feel grateful when we do not. This concept directly relates to two important concepts in the teachings of the New Church: reformation and regeneration. The second of these two, regeneration is what the Lord does in changing our motivations or giving us a new will that loves different things than we naturally do. We need to do something in preparation that allows the miracle of regeneration to take place. Our part is called reformation and is described in this way:

The evils we are born with are in the will that is part of our earthly self; this earthly will pressures the intellect to agree with it and to have thoughts that harmonize with its desires. Therefore if we are to be regenerated, this has to happen by means of our intellect as an intermediate cause.

This process draws on pieces of information that our intellect receives, first from our parents and teachers, and later from our reading the Word, listening to preaching, reading books, and having conversations. The things that our intellect receives as a result are called truths. Therefore to say that we are reformed by means of our intellect is the same as saying that we are reformed by means of truths that our intellect receives. Truths teach us who to believe in, what to believe, and also what to do and what to will. After all, whatever we do, we do from our will and in accordance with our understanding.

Since our will is evil from the day we are born, and since our intellect teaches us what is evil and what is good and that it is possible for us to will one and not the other, it follows that our intellect is the means by which we have to be reformed. During the phase called our reformation, we come to mentally see and admit that evil is evil and goodness is good, and make the decision to choose what is good. When we actually try to abstain from evil and do what is good, the phase called our regeneration begins. (*True Christian Religion/True Christianity* 587)

Most likely the last time that you felt real gratitude did not result from a conscious decision to be grateful. Your gratitude arose because you felt cared for. Do you feel well cared for by the Lord? Do you have some thought of receiving good affections and wise insights from Him? What sorts of things could happen that would have you feel grateful?

Suppose you are not feeling grateful. If you cannot make yourself feel that way, what can you do while you wait for the feeling to come? Should you just wait? Why does it say that the Lord demands thanksgiving if we cannot make ourselves feel grateful? Perhaps you have already thought of the answer. It is our job to control our actions and monitor the things that we are thinking about. Even when we do not feel thankful, we can act in thankful ways. We can attend church, say prayers, and share what blessings we have with others. We can do all of these things before we feel very thankful. We can reflect on the things that have happened in our lives. We can think of the benefits that we have received, the talents that we have been blessed with and the loving friends that we have. Sometimes we can reflect and a feeling of gratitude arises. When we take time to stop and think, we may have no trouble feeling thankful.

But when we are in a dark mood, life seems so bleak that nothing looks that great, everything looks flawed. One example of this state of mind occurs when a person senses that his or her marriage has gone cold. The spouse seems like the enemy. His or her actions seem calculated to irritate. All the spouse's faults loom huge in the eyes of the person who feels the cold. At these times, one just doesn't feel love. The Lord has quite distinctly told us that these times of cold in marriage can and do happen and they

happen not just in bad marriages. From time to time cold will come into every marriage. What should one do then? When a husband feels cold toward his wife, he cannot directly change that feeling. But he can avoid expressing his lack of love as much as possible. He can consciously make gestures of caring and friendship. He can act in a loving way even when expressions of affection may feel empty and doing nice things may take a tremendous amount of self-compulsion. Yet this is the only way out of the state of cold in marriage. We cannot directly change our feelings, which is the Lord's job. It is called regeneration. Our job is to work on what we are doing and what we are thinking. This is what the Lord has told us to do when we do not feel love in marriage. It is the work of reformation.

It is not hard to see how this doctrine applies to times when we do not feel grateful to the Lord. There will be times for all of us when we do not feel thankful. We can recognize that this is our state of mind and acknowledge it to ourselves and the Lord. Yet we should not dwell morbidly on our lack of thankfulness. What we can do is think about the Lord's care. Perhaps reflect on the Lord as our Shepherd, as our heavenly Father. We can make time for those acts of worship that express thanks. But there is something else that we can work on that is even more important but will not produce any quick fix.

One of the keys to feeling grateful is seeing things to be grateful for. We do not consciously see what the Lord is doing for us as it is happening. The Lord wants His work to be invisible in this way. It is essential for our freedom that we do not see His work too clearly. Yet we are told that the Lord works in millions of more ways than we can possibly think of. He works with everything around us from the greatest events to the tiniest elements of each of our lives. He works in a special way by means of other people, people who can express something of His love and His care. By using the people around us, the Lord can touch our lives with some of the greatest blessing of life. Too often we can miss these gifts from the Lord. Somehow we do not see them. We can miss the caring and efforts of those around us. We miss these things and consequently miss seeing things that could arouse a sense of gratitude. Why don't we see the good things that are happen around us? We have been told that the things that our mind focuses on relate directly to what we love. When we do not care about something, we give little attention to it.

It is interesting to read that when the angels look at other people, for example when they focus on our lives, they scarcely see the evil in us, but instead they focus on what is good and true. They even work to put a good interpretation on what is bad. The opposite is true of evil spirits, they tend to see nothing but evil in others and if they see anything good they either perceive it as nothing or put a bad interpretation on it (*Arcana Caelestia* 1079). Now, of course, we cannot just assume the outlook of the angels. There are parts of each of us that stand in the way of seeing what is good in those around us. But if we want to make progress, we can recognize the thoughts of contempt that we have for other people. We can recognize when we are dismissing the efforts of others as insignificant. We can recognize that we spend more effort looking for evil in others than we do looking for what is good. Perhaps, we will get a glimpse of the loves that lie beneath these thoughts.

The further we progress at fighting the self-centered parts of our thinking, the better we will be able to see good things happening around us. The further we progress in fighting our own inclinations to evil, the more we will see around ourselves to feel grateful for. We will see other people doing loving things. We will see them supporting things that we think are important. We will begin to see all the good that is going on in the world. This will not be some view of the world through rose-colored glasses. It will not be merely a habit of saying "Isn't that nice" about everything, whether it really is nice or not. Instead we will begin, more and more, to see things that are truly good. We will begin, more and more, to see something of the Lord's love. We may begin to recognize, in retrospect, something of His leading. We will start to sense the Lord's presence through out all things of life. And as we come to see the Lord

presence in those around us - as we come to recognize the power of good, a feeling of gratefulness will well up in our hearts. Feeling thankful will be quite easy.

The Lord does indeed call us to acts of thanksgiving even before we feel thankful. He does so not as a burden, but rather to encourage us to a state of mind when gratitude will come to us easily. Each of us can prepare for truly feeling thankful by working to see good things in those around us. We can work to rid our minds of the thoughts that would tend to diminish the value of other people's work. We can work to focus our minds on what is truly the most important parts of our lives. This is the work of a lifetime. As we make progress in this work we will more and more enter a state like the leper who returned to thank the Lord for the wonderful healing he had experienced. As we make progress in this work our celebration of Thanksgiving will come more and more to be a true expression of thankful heart. AMEN.

Lessons: Psalm 107, Luke 17:11-19, *Arcana Caelestia* 318

Psalm 107:1-9

¹ Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for *He is* good! For His mercy *endures* forever. ² Let the redeemed of the LORD say *so*, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy, ³ And gathered out of the lands, From the east and from the west, From the north and from the south. ⁴ They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate way; They found no city to dwell in. ⁵ Hungry and thirsty, Their soul fainted in them. ⁶ Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, *And* He delivered them out of their distresses. ⁷ And He led them forth by the right way, That they might go to a city for a dwelling place. ⁸ Oh, that *men* would give thanks to the LORD *for* His goodness, *And for* His wonderful works to the children of men! ⁹ For He satisfies the longing soul, And fills the hungry soul with goodness.

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹ Now it happened as Jesus went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. ¹² Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. ¹³ And they lifted up *their* voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ So when He saw *them*, He said to them, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, ¹⁶ and fell down on *his* face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ So Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where *are* the nine?" ¹⁸ Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ And He said to him, "Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well."

***Arcana Caelestia* 318**

A certain spirit once came and spoke to me. Certain signs made it clear that he had only recently departed the earthly life. Imagining that he was still in the world, he did not at first know where he was; but once he was given to know that he was in the next life and that he no longer had any material possessions, such as a home, wealth, and the like, but was in another realm in which he had been divested of all he possessed in the world, he was greatly distressed, not knowing which way he was to go or where he was going to live. He was told however that the Lord alone provided for him and for everyone. He was at that point left to himself to think in the same way as he had done in the world. He began to think about what he would do now that he had been deprived of all those things that had made life possible (everybody's thoughts in the next life are plainly perceived). But in his distress he was brought into the company of celestial spirits who were from the province of the heart and who rendered him whatever kindly service he desired. After this he was left to himself again, and by virtue of charity began to think about how he could repay so much kindness. All this proved that during his lifetime he had been governed by charity derived from faith. Consequently he was raised up straightaway into heaven.