All That We Have and All That We Offer

Webster’s Dictionary defines “Ingratitude” as: “forgetfulness of, or poor return for, kindness or favors received.” It can also be defined as not appreciating or valuing what you have.

Ingratitude.
1. It’s the mother of every vice.¹
2. It’s the daughter of pride.²
3. And it sickens benevolence.³

I suspect if you ask around, most folks would say they’re quite grateful for all they have. Yes, more often than not, our culture measures gratitude by what we have – the possessions we own, the power we hold, even the pleasures we enjoy. This attitude of ingratitude is so ingrained, so misunderstood, and in a way so very disguised in the promotions, messages, and news that bombard us throughout the day. Take for example the stand - or should I say knee – of defiance taken by a number of NFL players.

Here’s what one American had to say about it:

“If you really feel the need to take a knee, come with me to church on Sunday and we’ll both kneel before Almighty God… We’ll beg forgiveness for both of our ingratitude for all He has provided us. We’ll appeal to Him for understanding and wisdom. We’ll pray for liberty and justice for all... because He is the one who provides those things.” ⁴

It wasn’t that long ago that President Lincoln expressed similar concerns:

“We have been the recipients of the choicest blessings of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation ever has grown; BUT WE HAVE FORGOTTEN GOD! We have forgotten the gracious Hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.” ⁵
I wonder...

How many of us really notice our multitude of everyday blessings, let alone acknowledge them as the gifts from God that they are?

How many of us truly believe that we are nothing and have nothing without Him, that He welcomed us out of nothingness in Creation to love and serve Him, and to love and serve others?

My brothers and sisters, we owe God the Father quite simply everything - our praise, our love, our lives.

Isaiah reminds us of this in his version of the vineyard parable, where the Lord has patiently labored on his beloved, giving of Himself so that they can bear the fruits of living out God’s will. Yes, we are his “choicest plants,” his “cherished plants” and he lavishes us with his constant and generous care. We’ve been planted on a “fertile hillside” with a good exposure, surrounded by hedges to keep at bay the trespassers that might damage us, and been given plenty of sunshine and rain.

Even so, when we refuse to produce fruit, when we begin down the path of comparing have to have nots or demanding “more more more”, when we refuse to see the fruit as only the material means to fill our emptiness, our Lord refuses to give up.

And so it was 2000 years ago when ingratitude took the shape of the blackest ingratitude.  God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him.6 Our God refused to give up us.

Yes, the parable of the vineyard is ultimately a look at our relationship with Christ Jesus. You see God has given us the means to communion with Him. We have been given the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus.

And yet 2000 years later we still find ourselves failing to nourish this relationship with our Savior. C.S. Lewis once wrote that “the safest road to Hell is the gradual one -- the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”7

Then again sometimes our failure takes shape when a beast of the field suddenly appears and feeds upon the vineyard.

Today we are learning about this in a hard-hitting way. The parables are chock full of frustration, desperation, violence, vengeance, and murder. The depravity, wickedness, and evil of our failure to “produce fruits at the proper time” is clearly on display in Matthew’s Gospel and sadly in Las Vegas.
Families, friends, all children of God mourn and weep for the fallen and wounded in last week’s tragedy. We mourn and weep for those who even now continue to lose their way and drift back into a vague understanding of life and its obligations, or worse yet, a numbness that some mistakenly describe as “resilience.”

My brothers and sisters, life is not only full of meaning but full of urgency when we put ourselves back into the “big picture” that Jesus presents in his parable.

When we recall that the Father welcomed us out of nothingness in Creation, that He sent his only Son to save us, that he sent His Spirit to “lead us into all truth”, there is indeed urgency to offer up gratitude as the first of our fruits. Yes, God created us to manifest His glory in a special way. He gave us an intellect and a will that we might know, praise, and love our Creator.

The fruits of true gratitude can only exist in a reverent relationship between an “I” and a “thou.” It’s that free response of a heart which says, “I thank you.” Is it no surprise then that study after study finds that gratitude makes us happier, helps us make more friends, deepens relationships, improves marriages, makes us healthier, makes for more effective managers, increases decision-making capabilities and productivity, and so much more?!8

So as we approach this table, let us look both behind and ahead. Let us look behind in gratitude for God’s gift of life and all that we have been gifted. And let us look ahead in hope to the day when we are judged by our fruits and our faith and welcomed into the heavenly banquet of eternal life.

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1 French Proverb.
2 Spanish Proverb.
3 German Proverb.
4 CBS Houston webpage. Open Letter To Kneeling NFL Players http://cbsloc.al/2xFwjw7
5 http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/fast.htm
6 1 John 4:9
7 C.S. Lewis, Screwtape Letters
8 http://happierhuman.com/benefits-of-gratitude/