



What Do We Have to be Thankful for?

Among the beautiful messages in the 1937 film *Captains Courageous* is one relating to thankfulness. When spoiled rich kid Harvey says to Portuguese fisherman Manuel about Manuel's father, "He didn't do much for you; I mean, he didn't leave you anything," it evoked quite a reaction. Manuel passionately replied in his broken English:



He leave me this hurdy-gurdy [a musical instrument] that his grandfather leave him. He teach me how to fish, how to sail a boat. He gave me arms and hands and feet, feeling good outside ... and he teach me how to feel good inside. My father do all this; he have 17 other kids, beside. What else a father do, huh?

This dialogue presents two very different perspectives. One always wants more; the other knows we have already gotten more. And don't we see both — one perhaps all too frequently — represented in our society today?

One is apparent in the violent protests around the world, in which people cause mayhem because, by their lights, they haven't gotten what's coming. The other is represented by people who, by a higher light, know we haven't gotten what's coming — and that this actually is something for which to be very, very thankful.

As to the first perspective, when we don't get what we consider a birthright, we're usually upset, aren't we? "I want what's mine!" we may think. And as we've seen, this can manifest itself not just with the fruits of our own hand (e.g., salary), but with handouts.

In contrast to the anger and unhappiness of this protest mentality is the "present" mentality, which was colorfully expressed by G.K. Chesterton when he said, "Goods look a lot better when wrapped as gifts." We appreciate presents because they're a bonus; they're things we don't deserve. They tend to make us, in a word, happy.

What follows from this, however, is that if we continuously received gifts, we could be consistently happy. But how can one cultivate this happiness-inducing present mentality?

While trying raise my ire many years ago, someone close to me said about my faith, "Catholicism is a religion for losers." Yet there was a funny thing about his statement.

He was right.

Yet there was a point he missed.

We're all losers.

And one needn't be a believer to understand the value of the message here. In fact, given our time's irreligious climate, I always like to point out the utilitarian aspects of authentic faith. For there is



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something that is not a matter of faith but of fact: man's nature. We operate by certain psychological principles, and something is clear when taking them into consideration: faith works.

As to the aspect of Christianity relevant here, it's one that works quite well to remedy a problem of man's nature: that spirit of entitlement. For what do we really deserve? Christianity teaches that since we're all sinners, we actually deserve damnation. Yet its message is also that we won't get what we deserve because God sacrificed for our sins and is merciful. And there is that greatest gift of all He offers: salvation.

Upon accepting the above, everything does appear a gift because we realize that we, being losers who lost Eden, deserve nothing. All is icing on the cake, from the air we breathe to the pencil we use. Oh, this doesn't mean we won't ask our boss for a raise or seek better deals when shopping; there can be legitimate reasons for doing so such as the imperative of putting food on your family's table. It doesn't mean we may not sometimes protest. But a wise person protests not because he deserves something, but because the Truth, the good, deserves something: to be defended. And understanding what we really deserve certainly doesn't mean that we're unduly beholden to the government; it is just as wrong for the sinners within it to have a spirit of entitlement — to feel they have some special hold on the citizenry — as it is for anyone outside of government.

So while someone else close to me once complained about Christianity and said "they beat you down" (with clerics' talk of our sinfulness), she missed the point as well. It is a beat-down that builds up. It's only when our ego shrinks that our happiness can grow; it is only when we become less that what we're blessed with seems like more. This is why, contrary to the earlier pagan creeds, Christianity has always stressed humility. It is why one of the faith's symbols isn't a conquering Caesar flanked by centurions, but Jesus riding a lowly donkey. As the prophet Zechariah wrote, "Behold, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious. He is humble and riding on an ass...." It is the triumph of humility.

So now perhaps we can know why Chesterton also said, "Thanks are the highest form of thought." When we're thankful, we're recognizing the reality that everything is a bonus; we're showing the gratitude owed by one who continually receives gifts. And this is easy to understand. After all, what do we think of someone who is done a favor and won't even say "thank you"? How lofty does his mindset appear at that moment?

We certainly don't want to be that fellow. Yet the attitude in question here isn't like being an optimist, either; the thankful person sees the glass as completely full because he is a realist. Our glass actually is full.

For whether God gave us arms and hands and feet and whether we feel good outside or not, He teaches us how to feel good inside. He gave us everything we have and the whole world around us, besides. What else a Father do, huh?

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