

## VIRTUE 21

# GRATITUDE

For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

—1 Corinthians 4:7

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

—Philippians 4:11-14

**G***ratitude* simply means contentment and thankfulness. While having gratitude can enhance our life satisfaction and daily sense of being, the opposite of gratitude (e.g., greed or entitlement) can turn us into bitter, angry people and wreck our daily sense of being.

The knightly trait of gratitude includes both *being* grateful in diverse circumstances as well as *expressing* gratitude to God and others. Toward the latter part of the medieval knight era (the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), many knights acquired wealth and power and

developed relationships with royalty. This wealth and friendship with the king's court brought feasting and abundance in many ways. In fact, part of a squire's training as a knight was "learning how to serve his Lord at meals: the order in which dishes should be presented, where they should be placed, how many fingers to use in holding the joint for the Lord to carve, how to cut the trenchers and place them on the table."<sup>52</sup>

So how does a knight move from the table of kings to pottage for breakfast (a stew made from oats), barley bread for dinner, and the company of a horse and peasants on the battlefield? By having gratitude, that's how. Most people who have lived past their forties have either witnessed extreme plenty and extreme poor or have experienced firsthand these circumstances. The two Bible passages above provide the key on how to live in either circumstance: through Christ.

Do you know someone going through a rough patch in life? Someone who needs to hit rock bottom so they finally change their way of living? One of the ways you can tell they are getting close is by evaluating their level of gratitude. If a person has gone through a rough time and then claims they are finally at rock bottom and ready to cooperate with God's plan, check their level of gratitude. If they are still proud, haughty, and ungrateful, chances are they still have a way to go before hitting bottom. But if they are truly humble and grateful, they may be in a better place—a place where God can start rebuilding their life His way.

I remember going through such a rough patch when I was younger. And I am very grateful (and so are my kids, for there is no telling if they would be alive today) that I chose God's way when presented with some challenging time and life choices. We are all faced with critical junctures in our lives where we are faced with choosing our way or God's way. Fortunately, this was a situation where I chose God's way.

I was seventeen and had saved just enough money, eleven hundred dollars, to buy a motorcycle I had been craving for months (a Yamaha Vision 550). I was especially proud of this purchase

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because it had low miles, and the person I bought it from also gave me his leather riding jacket and a helmet. However, the helmet, as he pointed out, did not go with the motorcycle because it did not match. The motorcycle was gray, and the helmet was silver with a red stripe and had the word *Turbo* on the side.

I had just brought the motorcycle home and decided to take it out for a quick test run—so quick that I neglected to even put on my new helmet. I was about two blocks from my house, going about thirty mph when a teenager raced his car straight out of his court right in front of me. I had no time to react; all I could do was slam on my brakes and hope to slow down before hitting his car broadside. The impact came, and I flew off the motorcycle straight through the passenger window headfirst. Thankfully, the window was rolled down (I am not sure I would be writing this story if it was not!).

I got up, checked for broken bones (only my wrist was injured), exchanged insurance information, and then walked my wrecked motorcycle home. I was home icing my wounds for about an hour when my girlfriend of about six months called on the phone. When I was about halfway into explaining my rough day to her, she broke the conversation with words that no teenage boyfriend wants to hear: “I am breaking up with you.” Shocked, I asked why, and her response took the conversation from bad to really bad. She said, “Because my mom doesn’t think you’re going anywhere in life—no college plans yet, no promising career opportunities, etc.”

So, after losing my life savings, my motorcycle, and my girlfriend, I am now starting to lose my self-esteem. Feeling like things could not get any worse, I started trying to pick up any of the pieces that were left. Then the phone rang again. This time it was my dad, who informed me that one of my friends had racked up a fifteen-hundred-dollar phone bill using his calling card I lent her to make just one call to her boyfriend who had recently moved to another country. So now, not only was I completely broke, I owed more than my entire net worth.

All of this happened within a three-hour time period. After receiving this news, I felt like I was incapable of picking up the pieces

and had been hit in the stomach by a battering ram. Looking back at this situation now, I believe I lost everything a teenager could lose—his money, girlfriend, transportation, and future money (by having to pay it to a debt not my own). All of this was erased within hours.

I was faced with the challenge of Job: I could either trust God's purpose for allowing challenge into my life and claim the promise in Romans 8:28 ("All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose"), or fall for the temptation to just "curse God and die" (Job 2:9).

That night, I walked to the river, tore off my shirt, and stood before the vast, empty, quiet sky. I asked God to take what was left of my life and to start building it again His way and on His foundation. Up to that day, I had been building my own life with my own choices based on my own desires and teenage whims. Although I became a Christian when I was about eleven, I had not yet given control of my life to Christ. But that night, it all changed, and I relinquished control of my life to God. I resolved to start building the rest of my life from that day forward using the principles of Scripture and to give Him the means and permission to rebuild my life on a solid foundation through my obedience to Him.

That night, I chose to be grateful and humble. Rather than proudly taking charge to rebuild my life on my own foundation, I began building my life on the solid foundation of Christ. Just weeks after making this resolution, God blessed me through healing and encouragement. The insurance company gave me a check for well over the amount of my motorcycle, my wrist was healed, my girlfriend had been forgiven, and my life was starting to come back together.

To top it off, God even did something that allowed me to see His hand in these difficult circumstances. My friend Jason came over to help me find a different motorcycle, and I ended up buying a Yamaha Seca 650 that was silver and red and had "Turbo" painted on the side. After driving the motorcycle home, I set the helmet on the table and then noticed that the new motorcycle exactly matched

the helmet that came with the previous motorcycle. In fact, the helmet was actually made to match the red-and-silver Seca Turbo. It was one of those “God moments”—a moment where God showed His signature in the tapestry of my life.

For the next few years, I started building my life on God’s promises (e.g., Jeremiah 29:11-12). By going to church, feeding myself with His Word, and striving to live a life of obedience and gratitude, I gave God permission to build my life His way.

I was married four years after this incident. Without telling me, the pastor at our wedding read this passage as a testimony to what God had done in my life:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash (Matthew 7:24-27).

By choosing gratitude that day rather than rebellion, some means to ease the pain, or a rampage to rebuild my life my way by my methods, I allowed God to use a bulldozer to clear off the land of my future life and to start building it *His* way, with *His* methods, in *His* timing, and using *His* tools. Sadly, it was during this same season that I watched many of my friends make different choices—choices to build their houses on their own (sandy) foundation, only to watch them fall down months or years later.

I can honestly say that my life now would not be the same if I had not chosen gratitude that day. Gratitude enabled me to respond to dire circumstances with an attitude of hopeful expectation. Without

being grateful for just having the chance to give what was left of my life to God (rather than needing my life plus money plus girlfriend plus transportation before being grateful), I set myself in a position to allow better times to come—times that God would bring about in His way. I can also honestly say that my life today is not to my own credit. God built my life; I just supplied the willing worker (obedience) to build with His plan, His materials, and His timing.

**REFLECT**

To that place the Knight was accustomed to come each day in order to pray and adore Almighty God, whom he thanked for all the honors He had shown him throughout his life.<sup>53</sup>

—The Hermit Knight in Ramon Lull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry*

Thankfulness is not some sort of magic formula; it is the language of love, which enables you to communicate effectively with Jesus. A thankful mindset does not entail a denial of reality with its plethora of problems. Instead, it rejoices in Jesus your Savior, in the midst of trials and tribulations.<sup>54</sup>

—Sarah Young

**RESPOND**

1. How does gratitude stop pride from growing in our hearts?
2. How can having gratitude today shape our lives in the future?
3. Why should we be grateful for our challenges?

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4. How is it our choice sometimes whether challenges can make us bitter or shape us for the better? How does gratitude play a role?
5. Sometimes it is easy to take things and people for granted. How can gratitude change this?