

## ***“You Didn’t Build That”: Gratitude and Humility***

1 Corinthians 4:17, Deuteronomy 8:12-18

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Two men were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull charging toward them. They ran toward the nearest fence, but it looked like they wouldn’t make it. One of them yelled out, “Joe, say a prayer!” Joe said, “I don’t know any prayers!” The first fellow said, “You better think of one. That bull is catching up!” “OK,” Joe said. “The only one I can think of is the grace my father used to say: ‘O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.’”

More to the point this morning: for what we have *already* received, make us truly thankful. Paul asks a pointed question in 1 Corinthians 4:7—“What do you have that you did not receive?” He’s talking there about the pride of church leaders and people who see themselves as better than Paul. He goes on to ask, “And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” Your spiritual gifts, your faith, your knowledge, your abilities—they have all been *received*, so why brag about it?

But I’d like to pose Paul’s question more broadly: What do you have that you did not receive?

Let’s say you asked me that question. Did I build my business? No, it’s been going for about 250 years. Did I build my house? No, it is provided for me. Did I earn my job skills? No, they were taught to me. Did I make myself intelligent? No, I had good genes and good schools. Did I even make myself a Christian? No, even my faith was a gift.

It sounds like I’m one of the 47%. I didn’t do anything for myself. But the question to ask yourself is not whether you are a maker or a taker. The right question is whether you see yourself as a maker or a *receiver*. The message of the Bible is that we are all receivers. God is the Maker. As we read from Psalm 100, “It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.” The problem with self-made men is that they worship their maker. We did not make ourselves. We were endowed by our Creator. When we are children, we imagine that we are the product of our own wills, and we have a sense of self without any sense of where that self came from. But as we get older we recognize that what we call “I” is the product of our parents, our families, our schools, our churches, our nation, tradition, civilization, biology, history...and God.

So we return to Paul’s question: What do you have that you did not receive?

Think of your life and your body.

- Every cell of you contains plans in the form of DNA, and every strand of that DNA you *received* from your mother or your father.
- Every bit of food you ate as a baby and a child which went into building your body you received from someone else.
- Every beat of your heart is beyond your control and something you receive as a gift.
- Every breath you take—most of them unconscious—takes in air that is provided for you.
- Every thought you have moves through neurons and a brain given to you, and the intellect you are proud of you received from your ancestors and teachers.
- Every feeling in your heart for God was placed there by God’s Spirit as a gift and the ability to believe in God comes from him, not from yourself.

- Every person you love is a person you did not make, and every relationship you cherish is with a person who was brought into your life by forces beyond your control.

G. K. Chesterton wrote, “When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs? Thomas Merton wrote, “To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything He has given us—and he has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of His love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from Him. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference.”

To lose sight of the fact that all we have is a gift is to lose perspective on reality. It is our human nature that we wish to imagine that we are gods. We love thinking that we made ourselves. We like to think that we are responsible for all the good in our lives but none of the bad. When things go well for us, we are tempted to think that we did it all by ourselves. But we never accomplish anything all by ourselves. We always stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. We always benefit from the work of others. And even deeper than that: everything we have and are comes from God.

Moses warned the people of Israel not to think of themselves as self-made. In Deuteronomy 8 (a passage I keep coming back to), Moses gives a sermon to people who are about to enter the Promised Land without him. He urges them to remember the Lord when they find themselves in a new country:

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth (8:12-18a).

Could the warning be more relevant? When you get there, when you are rich and have it made, don’t think that your own might got you that wealth. It is God who gave you the power to get wealth. It is God who brought you to this land. It is God who set brought you out of slavery. It is God who saved your life.

President Obama got into big trouble last summer when he told businessmen that they didn’t build their businesses by themselves. Here is the infamous quotation:

If you’ve been successful, you didn’t get there on your own. I’m always struck by people who think, well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. Let me tell you something – there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there. If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business, you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.

I think the President misspoke. I think what he meant to say, given the context, was “If you’ve got a business, you didn’t build that *by yourself*. Somebody else *helped* to make that happen.” The President’s message was that on a human level we are all connected. No one’s business operates in a vacuum.

You can’t have a business on Block Island without depending on the ferry and the harbor and the roads. You can’t have a business here without a town government and bankers and a phone company and a newspaper to promote your wares. You can’t have a business without employees who have been educated in schools and trained by their parents to work. You can’t build it all by yourself.

When you remember that, you feel not so much pride as gratitude—and along with that, humility. Michelle Obama tried to underline that in her convention speech about her own childhood:

*We learned about gratitude and humility - that so many people had a hand in our success, from the teachers who inspired us to the janitors who kept our school clean... and we were taught to value everyone's contribution and treat everyone with respect.*

But Moses takes it a step further. It’s not just people we owe our success to: it’s God. God is the one who saved us, who brought us here, and God is the one who made this world. Most importantly, it is God who made *us*. It is God who gave us the ability to do whatever it is that makes us proud.

Gratitude and humility go hand in hand. T. S. Eliot wrote in his later years, “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless (“East Coker, *Four Quartets*). If you are proud, you think you did it yourself. In an early season of *The Simpsons*, the family sits down to a Thanksgiving meal and Bart is asked to say grace. He says, “Dear God, we paid for all of this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.” That’s not an unusual attitude, even if we don’t say it out loud. But if you are *humble*, you see reality more clearly and you understand that you have received more than you have given. Henry Ward Beecher, the great Brooklyn preacher and friend of Mark Twain, once said, “Pride slays thanksgiving, but a humble mind is the soil out of which it naturally comes. A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves.”

The Masai tribe in Africa understands that gratitude and humility are linked. When they want to say “Thank you,” they touch their forehead down to the ground and say, literally, “My head is in the dirt.” Giving thanks requires humbling ourselves. Robert Emmons of UC Davis and Michael McCullough of Miami did a study in 2003 that demonstrated that those who were more humble and grateful were happier, healthier, and more successful [*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/pdfs/GratitudePDFs/6Emmons-BlessingsBurdens.pdf>]. They said that showing gratitude requires “self-reflection, the ability to understand that one is dependent on the help of others, and the humility to realize one’s limitations” Furthermore, they said, in order to be grateful one must focus on blessings and rise above negativity and the inequalities of everyday life.

Many religions teach gratitude and humility. What the Christian gospel says is that pride has always been at the root of the human problem. Pride is what alienates us from God by making us ungrateful and making us want to live under the delusion that we are in control. But God broke through that alienation in Jesus Christ, reconciling us to himself by saying on the cross in unmistakable physical language “I love you. I forgive you.” And he said by the resurrection, “I am giving you the gift of eternal life—of which Jesus is the first example and of

which the Spirit is the down payment.” Our response to the cross and resurrection is to say what Paul did: “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” [2 Corinthians 9:15].

Anne Lamott is an unconventional Christian writer who appeals to people outside the church and has been on the *New York Times* best seller list many times. She just came out with a new book on prayer with the title *Help Thanks Wow*. Those are the three essential prayers: Help! Thanks! and Wow!. All three are at the heart of the Christian life, but none is more important than the prayer we focus on today. G. K. Chesterton said, “I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” Gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder. Let us be happy today. Let us give thanks.