

“Grumbling and Gratitude”

In the fall of 1978 I went to work for Blue Cross and Blue Shield in downtown Indianapolis. I was hired into the customer service department where I initially responded to written inquiries and complaints and was quickly moved to answering phones and handling call-in complaints and inquiries. I suppose that is because I have always been more verbal than tactile...surprise, surprise. We had a lot of fun responding to some complaints and there were a few complaints that became legendary. We got pictures all the time to document before and after results. Regardless of how much better one looked or how shapely one became we always and I assume they still do, denied all claims for elective plastic surgery. There was one guy who sent us his gold cap, I'm not sure how he removed it, but he sent it to us anyway because we would not pay for his gold cap on his dental plan. Most people's complaints held some merit and many were legitimate complaints and were easily correctable. People were often very thankful for the help we were able to provide. Recently, after reading a story about some of the complaints that computer manufacturers help desks receive I will be forever thankful that I do not have that experience in my background. You see I believe much of my sarcasm and my sometimes-caustic verbiage stems from hearing thousands of caustic and sarcastic responses on those phones nearly thirty years ago. And, yes I am still a work in progress and I pray that God will continue to mellow my responses and allow me to think before I speak even though my thoughts will probably always run to the acerbic. Listen to a few of

the “technologically challenged” recent complaints to help desks. These are quoted from the Wall Street Journal.

Here are some funny stories from early in the computer era. Compaq, no longer in business, published a story years ago that said that they were considering changing the command "Press Any Key" to "Press Return Key" because of the flood of calls asking where the "Any" key is. An IBM customer was asked to send a copy of her defective diskettes. A few days later a letter arrived from the customer along with photocopies of the diskettes. A Dell technician advised his customer to put his troubled floppy back in the drive and close the door. The customer asked the tech to hold on, and was heard putting the phone down, getting up and crossing the room to close the door to his room. Another Dell customer called to say he couldn't get his computer to fax anything. After 40 minutes of trouble-shooting, the technician discovered the man was trying to fax a piece of paper by holding it in front of the monitor screen and hitting the "send" key. A confused caller to IBM was having troubles printing documents. He told the technician that the computer had said it "couldn't find printer". The user had also tried turning the computer screen to face the printer - but that his computer still couldn't "see" the printer. An exasperated caller to Dell Computer Tech Support couldn't get her new Dell Computer to turn on. After ensuring the computer was plugged in, the technician asked her what happened when she pushed the power button. Her response, "I pushed and pushed on this foot pedal and nothing happens." The "foot pedal" turned out to be the computer's mouse. An IBM customer had troubles installing software and rang for support. "I put in the first disk, and that was OK. It said to put in the second disk, and had some problems with the disk. When

it said to put in the third disk - I couldn't even fit it in..." The user hadn't realized that

"Insert Disk 2" meant to remove Disk 1 first.

Another customer called Compaq tech support to say her brand-new computer wouldn't work. She said she unpacked the unit, plugged it in and sat there for 20 minutes waiting for something to happen. When asked what happened when she pressed the power switch, she asked "What power switch?" It seems to me a lot of these problems could have been solved by looking in the instruction book (What? You don't read it either?).

Grumbling and complaining is so much more natural than giving thanks. And apparently ignorance is more normal than competence...present company excluded. The Bible lets us know from cover to cover that even a solid relationship with the God of creation is not necessarily an antidote for grumbling and complaining. The children of Israel were adept at complaining. They became disillusioned with manna, disillusioned with the time Moses spent on Mt. Sinai, disillusioned with God and their disillusionment led to grumbling and complaining. It seems that even in modern history that Israel is still disillusioned with Moses. When Golda Meier was Prime Minister of Israel she once said, "Moses dragged us through the desert to the one place in the Middle East where there is no oil.

Paul shared the following verse with the believers at Thessalonica, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thess. 5:18) This verse has caused a tremendous amount of grief to many people. Grief because of the exchange of one word for another in this small little verse. The exchange of the word "in" with "for". We don't have to be thankful for everything but we should strive to have a life, an attitude

and a way of living that allows us to be thankful and yet be able to honestly approach God with those things that confuse us, disillusion us and try us.

I believe God wants us to turn to him with our doubts, fears and complaints but God also expects us to realize that meaning in most situations can only be assigned well after the fact. Remember this picture? This is an aerial picture that was taken on the morning of May 11, 1996 of the site in the Florida Everglades where ValuJet flight 592 crashed just eight minutes after take-off. I remember that morning and this image well. I was absolutely amazed that there were really very few signs that 104 passengers, five crew and an airplane whose fuselage was over 125 feet long had crashed. I was also amazed when I later read the story of Terry Huckaby. Terry was running late and got to Miami International Airport after the plane was scheduled to leave. Rushing and still hoping its departure had somehow been delayed so he could catch the flight, he made it to the gate only to discover the plane was indeed gone.

Before trying to work out an alternate schedule, the frustrated man put \$1 in a vending machine ... only to lose it. "I'm having a bad day," he said. "I missed my flight, and now I've lost a dollar." Someone behind the counter heard him and said, "No, you're the luckiest man alive. We just got word that your plane went down." What an abrupt call to reality that put his frustration into perspective!

I wish that I could say that all unwelcome events that happen or all tragedies that occur could turn around so quickly. I wish that thankfulness "in" any situation could be so easily recognized as Terry Huckaby's was, sadly that doesn't happen too often. But, a life filled

with thankfulness should at least be our destination while we struggle along the path of life's complaints. This verse in 1 Thessalonians tells us that this destination is God's desire and the purpose behind that desire is that the journey which is our life might just be a little more bearable in a world that is marred by sin, filled with trouble and yet if we learn to look for it, is always filled with beauty and many many things "in" which we can be thankful.

Robert E. Bruce relates the following incident: "While walking along a busy street one day, I heard someone singing. His sweet voice was distinguishable even above the noise of the traffic. When I located him, I noticed that he had no legs and was pushing himself through the crowd in a wheelchair. Catching up with him, I said, 'I want you to know, friend, that to hear singing from a person in your condition gives everyone else a lift.' He answered with a grateful smile, 'When I stopped looking at what I had lost and began concentrating on all I had left, I found much for which I could rejoice and be happy.'"

It is surprising, but back on the first Thanksgiving our forefathers were thankful for the precious little they had. A little boy said, "Salt is what ruins the mashed potatoes when it is left out." Using the same kind of negative definition, we can say, "Gratitude is what ruins life when it is left out." Romans 1:21, "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." A disposition of continual thankfulness comes from simply deciding to believe what God says about himself, that He is wise and has a wonderful plan for our lives, that he has the power to accomplish that plan, and he is

working to accomplish that plan no matter what our circumstances may be. People who decide to believe those things about God will always possess a quality of gratitude and while they may be poor in this world's goods, but they are truly rich spiritually. Some of the most appreciative people I have ever known were people who had little material wealth and many even lived below the poverty line.

In one of his stories, Charles Dickens has a character say, "My not knowing at one meal where I shall get the next is a great help to thankfulness." "Deciding to be grateful rather than bitter is a choice anyone can make." What makes the difference between being grouchy or grateful? Hebrews 12:15 says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." The causes of ungratefulness need to be discovered so that choices in the direction of gratitude can be made. We all know that we Christians are not immune to the problem of ingratitude. We live in an age that is marked by ingratitude. 2 Timothy 3:1-2 says, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. 2 For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy..."

Underneath the more obvious causes lies the real culprit: unbelief, denying that God knows what is best for us. Questioning God's goodness in difficult times can lead to three very harmful practices:

1. We question God's motives, which results in self-pity.
2. We start blaming everything or everyone around us, which results in anger.

3. We begin the game of comparing our plight with others, which generates doubt. The results are "worry, anger, self-pity, and a judgmental, complaining spirit."

Here are some suggestions for conquering ungratefulness:

1. Choose to give thanks. Decide to express gratitude "in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18) regardless of your understanding of the situation or results of the circumstances. It will become a habit, though there may be many slip-ups along the way.
2. Change your focus from circumstances to God. Regardless of how bad circumstances may be, God is still good; focus on that instead of complaining.
3. Do your best to see the bright side. Every situation can prompt either gratefulness or cynicism, depending on how we look at it. But gratefulness produces "peace, faith, contentment, and a positive attitude." Remember the guy in the wheelchair? What he said? "When I stopped looking at what I had lost and began concentrating on all I had left, I found much for which I could rejoice and be happy." As a magnet drawn through the sand picks up particles of iron, so a grateful heart finds some God-given blessing in every hour of distress.

Several years ago I ran into a wonderful little set of statements about thankfulness that has helped transform many of my thoughts and actions, it goes like this:

I am Thankful for.....

....the taxes I pay
....because it means I'm employed.

...the clothes that fit a little too snug
...because it means I have enough to eat.

...a lawn that needs mowing, windows that need cleaning and
...gutters that need fixing
...because it means I have a home.

...the spot I find at the far end of the parking lot
...because it means I am capable of walking.

...my huge heating bill
...because it means I am warm.

...all the complaining I hear about our government
...because it means we have freedom of speech.

...the lady behind me in church who sings off key.
...because it means that I can hear.

...the piles of laundry and ironing
...because it means my loved ones are nearby.

...the alarm that goes off in the early morning hours
...because it means that I'm alive.

...weariness and aching muscles at the end of the day
...because it means I have been productive.

I am even thankful for too much email, because it means I have friends who are thinking of me.

There is a story of a young man who was told by his doctor that he had only six months to live. In shock, the young man asked if there was anything that could be done. After all, he was still a young man and had many things left to do in life. The doctor thought about his question for a bit, and then finally gave him a solution. The doctor told the young man to go out and find the ugliest, most cantankerous woman in the county and marry her. He told the young man to insure that he found a woman who would incessantly nag him, and complain about everything he said or did. Then he had to go out

and buy the most beat-up old pickup truck he could find, preferably one that wouldn't run all of the time. Then he needed to rent a rundown old apartment right in the middle of the east side of Indianapolis. Somewhat skeptical the young man looked at the doctor and asked, "Doc, are you sure that this will help me to live longer?" "Not at all," replied the doctor,...“but, it sure will make you very thankful that you only have six months to live and six months with conditions like that will seem like a lifetime!"

You may or may not accept my belief that deciding to fill your heart and head full of thanks will change you and change your outlook on life. But can I make this request of you? Try it out. For one week, whatever happens in your life, find something in that situation for which you can give thanks. You may have to look pretty hard, but look for something. It may be very small, but find something to be thankful for each and every day. And try to find something different each day. Then, once you've found that thing to be thankful for, express your thanks to the person or persons who are responsible for that item of thanks. Don't keep the thanks inside. Either that or take the advice of the doctor. Let us pray.