

Cultivating a Spirit of Thankfulness

Even though we may stuff ourselves at the dinner table, celebrating Thanksgiving can actually make us healthier judging by recent research. Studies have shown that being thankful improves our physical and emotional health. Holding on to feelings of thankfulness boosts our immune system and increases blood supply to our heart. Daily guided exercises or the habit of keeping a weekly gratitude journal can increase our alertness, enthusiasm, and energy, and improve our sleep. People who describe themselves as feeling grateful tend to suffer less stress and depression than the rest of the population.

For all its benefits, gratitude doesn't come naturally to us. As Jesus passed through a village one day, he was spotted by ten lepers who desperately longed to be healed (Luke 17:11-19). They kept themselves at a distance as required by law but cried out to him, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" Instead of instantly healing the men, Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priest. As the ten lepers walked off to obey, their skin disease disappeared.

One of the men turned around, shouting praises to God as he came back to Jesus. He threw himself at his benefactor's feet. Jesus expressed amazement that only one man had thought to thank him. "Were not all ten cleansed?" he asked. "Where are the other nine?" He also pointed out that the only man who did respond was a Samaritan, a race despised by the Jewish people.

For Christians, cultivating a spirit of thankfulness is more than a good idea; it's a direct command from God. In the Old Testament, God laid down specific guidelines for the Israelites to bring thank offerings. In the New Testament, believers are instructed to be thankful in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18). When we're struggling with trials and difficulties, this sounds like a strange command, especially since we live in a culture that encourages us to act on the basis of how we feel. But God knows that when we focus on our blessings, it's easier to keep our problems and concerns in the right perspective.

King David never lost his keen awareness of all that God had done for the nation of Israel and for him personally. Even though he experienced disappointment, pain, and heartache, David often poured out his feelings of thankfulness to his Creator and Lord. That gratitude became the foundation of his worship of God.

Cultivating a spirit of thankfulness honors God and strengthens our faith. It also strengthens our relationships with other people. We can't be in a right relationship with God or with anyone without a spirit of thankfulness. No matter what problems we're struggling with, we don't want to be like the nine former lepers who forgot to say "thank you" to their Healer.

I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, and will glorify Your name forever. For Your lovingkindness toward me is great, and You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. Psalm 86:12-13

- D.N. Matthews