

THE DAILY CHOICE OF GRATITUDE

Daily Counting Our Blessings

Ezekiel 34:23-31

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-daily-choice-of-gratitude-daily-counting-our-blessings/>

The other day I had been working on this sermon during the morning (the challenges of counting blessings vs. being so complaint-based). I met Janet for lunch. It was taking way too long; they lost our order; when it came, her sandwich had sauce on it and she had asked for it without. I started getting upset and complaining to her about the slow, lousy service. Embarrassing, huh? Never mind that I had so much to be thankful for. My wonderful wife, time and money to buy food, a free country to move about, health to do so. Never mind that the number of hungry people in the world is more than the combined population of the USA, Canada and the European Union. How is it that we become so entitled, ungrateful and negative?

Brain research reveals that we are programmed genetically to be negative-focused. We believe it is an evolutionary development, a matter of species survival. Brain research shows that at a five-to-one ratio, we focus more on the glass half empty vs. half full. Now, we can rewire the brain, retrain it, but it takes practice. Think about it. Your world, my world—they are complaint-based and negative. Political debate, our place of employment, our friendships (finding fault with others). We look in the mirror and our self-esteem is negative. Whew! It takes a lot of energy to be that negative!

That's why we can relate to Ezekiel's words. He was a preacher in the period leading up to and including Exile. God's people were literally carried off and their land plundered by enemies. Simply put, they had so many things to be negative about! So Ezekiel offers them a picture of God's future: peace and security (v. 25); adequate and timely rains so that crops flourish and people are fed (vv. 26-28); personal freedom/eradication of slavery (v. 27);

As we wrap up this series on "The Daily Choice of Gratitude," allow me to offer some takeaways on how we can learn to count our blessings, to retrain our brains and hearts.

1) Practice giving thanks; don't wait for a feeling. Understand that thanksgiving is not an emotion. Someone said there are only two times to give thanks: when you feel like it and when you don't. We don't give thanks when we feel like it; we give thanks until we feel like it. . In one of his books, Art Simon, the founder of Bread for the World, reminds us that just as thanksgiving leads to further contentment, so coveting and complaining destroy contentment and lead to whining [*Rediscovering the Lord's Prayer*, p. 75].

2) Discover how gratitude can enrich other areas of life. I'm convinced that grateful people are happier people (and I might add, more pleasant to be around!). If we are thankful for past blessings, we will live more in the present and we will begin to see new possibilities for the future (I am indebted to Ken Gire for this thought, quoted in *A Decumbered Grief*, by Harold Ivan Smith, p. 108). Note how Ezekiel appeals to future blessings, while most Bible verses about giving thanks point to past blessings. Gratitude offers a new way to see the future.

3) Practice humility. We didn't do all this by ourselves! I love the scene in the old movie, "Shenandoah," starring Jimmy Stewart. It's set in the Civil War era. The family is gathered around the meal table and Stewart's character offers the prayer of Un-Thanksgiving: "Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you just the same anyway for this food we're about to eat, Amen!" The move from pride to gratitude is a difficult but important journey—from pride to humility and brokenness. If you have not yet accepted God's gift of forgiveness through Jesus Christ, isn't this true? You keep thinking, pridefully, that you can fix your life yourself.

4) Learn to trust the Good Shepherd. The earthly kings of Israel had greatly disappointed the people, and so in v. 23, God declares that He—God—will become Shepherd-King, and earthly rulers would be demoted to princes! Gratitude begins by knowing that humans will never provide answers for our souls. Only God can. By the way, Jesus knew his Bible (our Old Testament), and he appropriated this name, Good Shepherd, for himself (John 10). He claims to know his sheep, that his sheep hear his voice and that he lays down his life for his sheep. He holds his sheep in his hands and no one can pluck them out of his grip! Through Jesus, we know God's care and deliverance. No matter what else is going wrong with our world, God is an abiding presence! So let's count our blessings!