

## **A Prisoner's Attitude of Gratitude**



# Orthodox Christian **PRISON MINISTRY**

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“You need an attitude of gratitude!” This was the response that an amazing prisoner gave me, when I asked him how he maintained a positive spirit inside the medium-security prison where he lived. I met this man when I visited a prison weekly during my years as a seminarian. During our friendship that developed, this man shared with me how he was serving a life sentence with no chance of parole. Yet, while in prison he encountered Jesus Christ and had a radical conversion of faith. In fact, he came to understand how repentance means true change, a radical turning away from one’s sinful past and a sincere turning towards our loving and merciful God.

Now, I’m not naïve to believe every so-called conversion that I hear about in prison or anywhere else, but what convinced me of the sincerity of this man’s change was how all the other prisoners in our group viewed this man. They saw something in this person, and even turned to him for encouragement and support. Inside the prison, they witnessed the genuineness of this man’s conversion to God and the authenticity of his life in Christ.

So when I asked Carol what was his secret to living a Christ-centered life in prison, he surprisingly responded, “An attitude of gratitude. You need to always see things for which you can be grateful, and then consciously thank God for them. Never focus on what you don’t have, or on how unfair life is, but thank God for what you

do have, and for the blessings He gives us each and every day. Such an attitude of gratitude changes one's perspective on life."

Now that sounds like good advice for anyone, but it is even more amazing when you think that it comes from someone who will spend the rest of his life in prison! An attitude of gratitude!

Think about the national holiday of Thanksgiving our country celebrates. Do we all realize that Abraham Lincoln declared that last Thursday in November to be celebrated as a Day of Thanksgiving in 1863. That was right in the midst of the Civil War – a time of great calamity and tragedy, and yet President Lincoln wanted all Americans to pause and thank Almighty God! It's amazing to think of why he would declare a day of thanksgiving in the midst of civil war! He understood the central importance of always maintaining an attitude of gratitude.

And then there is St. Paul who gave the same piece of advice to the Church in Philippi when he himself languished in a prison and they suffered the threat of persecution. "Rejoice in the Lord always," he exhorted, "Again I say rejoice." Here, St. Paul was suffering in prison and the Philippians lived under the fear of persecution, yet he encouraged them to maintain a spirit of joy and gratitude. Later in this same letter, St. Paul reveals his own secret of peace and joy: "For I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty." In any and all circumstances, St. Paul learned to not only be content, but to actually carry a spirit of gratitude! And how could he do this? He reveals in the same letter that, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Christ is his source of contentment and the well-spring of his gratitude. In St. Paul's letter to the Church in Thessalonica he advises "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." In fact, throughout Paul's letters, he admonishes his readers to thank God more than 50 times. "Give thanks to God at all times" he says to the Ephesians. "Devote yourself to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving" he advised the Colossians. "In whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God" he admonishes.

Maintaining a spirit of gratitude, and seeing all of life – even with its surprises, struggles, disappointments, and crises – learning to see all of life through this prism of thankfulness is an extremely important spiritual discipline. It doesn't come naturally or easily to many, but it's a discipline we cultivate over time. I remember how Archbishop Anastasios would say that one's inability or forgetfulness of

expressing gratitude reflects a serious spiritual sickness! When we don't express this attitude of gratitude, it means pride is lurking nearby. We do not thank others, because by thanking them, we must acknowledge that they have done something special for us. Our pride hinders us from thanking God because we don't understand life itself as the most special and precious gift which God has given us.

Some sociologists call our present generation the "complaining generation" because we have such high expectations (and demands) while we have so little patience and passion to change things. We want and think we deserve to have everything NOW, and we're perplexed if we don't get it. This demanding and unhealthy attitude causes a self-righteous spirit of indignation that leads to ingratitude - a mind-set totally contrary to the spirit of our Lord. Contrast the demanding spirit of expecting everything here and now with the Christ-centered spirit of "rejoicing always and giving thanks in ALL circumstances."

Remember the story of ten lepers who approached Jesus from a distance, crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Our Lord did not heal them immediately, but instead told them to go and show themselves to the priests. Maybe he did this as a test, to see whether their faith was sincere, or maybe to see whether they would return and express their gratitude to their Healer. Whatever the reason, as they began their journey to the priests, suddenly all ten realized that a miracle occurred! Their dreaded disease of leprosy disappeared!

Yet after seeing themselves healed, only ONE out of TEN returned to thank Jesus for the miracle. Only one out of ten!!!! It's quite shocking to think that after such an incredible wonder, only one would make the effort to return and express gratitude to Christ. We can hypothesize that MAYBE the others were grateful. MAYBE they praised God in their hearts. MAYBE they thought about going back to Jesus, but first wanted to go and share their good news with their family. Whatever their intentions, the fact remains that only one out of ten actually made the effort to return and thank Christ.

Unfortunately, such ungratefulness appears too often among us? How many people turn to God when they are in trouble, or in need, yet when all goes well, they forget or ignore God. And the longer we dwell in comfort and prosperity, the more we deceive ourselves by thinking that we deserve all that we have! We may even feel that we have earned our blessings through hard work, great effort, and our brains. We forget, though, who gave us our health, our physical strength, our intelligence, and even the chance to live in this country of great opportunity. How arrogant to think we have succeeded all on our own, without the grace and blessings of God!

Thus, let us beware of several common temptations: 1) forgetting to express our gratitude for our many blessings; 2) being ungrateful for all we have, and even complaining about what we don't have; or worse of all, 3) thinking that we ourselves are the source of all our blessings. We must learn to thank God daily for life itself, and for whatever life brings. Ultimately, if we believe that we have a loving Father in heaven who watches over us, then we must realize that this same loving Father will be with us in the midst of any and all surprises in life – both good or bad. He will walk with us, never abandon us, and help us learn and grow from every and any circumstance, no matter how seemingly difficult or unwanted.

Conscious gratitude is a divine discipline for the human person. We must deliberately make gratitude an integral part of our prayer life to God, as well as a central part of our interactions with others. Don't allow our pride to determine our behavior, but let us continually humble ourselves and thank those all around us – our parents for giving us life, our families for showing us love, our friends who stay near us during our times of need, our teachers and other special people who have inspired us, guided us, and enlightened us. When we pause and reflect on our lives, I am sure that numerous people have touched our lives in positive ways. What is stopping us from thanking them with our words, by writing a letter, and by expressing our gratitude in other ways.

Living with an attitude of gratitude. How different our entire life would be if we could cultivate this spirit within our lives. We've all been blessed in countless ways. Our society too often focuses on complaining and noting the things that we don't have. The Good News of our Lord teaches us the exact opposite – to live with an attitude of gratitude.

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