



# FEED MY SHEEP

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## Boundaries, contentment, and more

### *The fruit of gratefulness, part 2*

Last month we began a study of the fruit of gratefulness, which is synonymous with thankfulness. We began by noticing that God expects us to be grateful in **all** things—even for the “negative blessings” that come our way in life. When the virtue of gratefulness is misused, we find people manifesting the negative traits of flattery, gushiness, and extravagant generosity. Having discussed the first two last month, let us now consider excessive generosity.

For most of us, probably the first thing that comes to mind is money. That is certainly valid. But it’s all relative, isn’t it? For one person to give away fifty thousand dollars might be a rather *insignificant* sum, but for another person, to give away just two thousand dollars would amount to bankruptcy. For the latter person, it is not only *excessive* generosity, it is foolishness; whereas for the former person, it might not be anywhere near *excessive* generosity in his circumstances.

This same principle applies not only to money and other material possessions, but it can apply to someone’s time, talent and energy as well. Again, the possible examples are myriad, but I will suggest that it can apply to one’s job, one’s club or other social interests, one’s church and even one’s family.

The underlying principle is that *one cannot give what one does not have*. It’s a boundary issue here. What I mean by that is that throughout life, we either draw boundary lines in dealing with others, or else we will suffer the consequences of having no boundaries: we will be stepped on, used and abused—whether intentionally or not; it doesn’t matter, you still get hurt all

the same. For example, in the workplace, if you have no boundaries, then the boss knows that he can always count on you to come back in to the shop or the office during the evenings and on weekends and holidays. Since you don’t know how to say “no,” you become a victim of your own lack of boundaries. You are *excessively generous* to the company. Generous to a fault, as we say.

A mother devotes her life to raising her children, but again she cannot give what she does not have. She needs to have down-time. She needs to have a break. She needs a regular opportunity to renew her physical and emotional energy. Otherwise, she will be drained and eventually it will result in illness and pain of some sort or another. She has to have boundaries, too. We all, do.

That is why for several years we offered a book simply called *Boundaries*. (It is still available from Amazon.com and other sources.) It was co-authored by Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend (Christian psychologists...and I know to some readers, the term “Christian psychologist” is an oxymoron. I understand; nevertheless, I find very few books I agree with 100 percent, so do as I do: eat the meat and spit out the bones.) I found this book to be very valuable in learning what boundaries are, how boundaries are established, how they can be broken by others, and how to make them firm so they cannot be broken by others.

Part of being a Christian means being a giver, being one who makes sacrifices, being one who is ready, willing and able to help others. But that does not mean that we must give until we have been sapped of all our time,

energy and resources. Because then we are no longer “able.”

The balancing biblical principle is that God expects each of us to be good stewards of all that He has given us. That means that we *should* draw boundaries with others so that we can *preserve* some of what He has given us so that our energy and resources are not completely emptied, resulting in our exhaustion and ultimately, ill health.

We all need to have time to allow our energy and resources to be replenished because if we are totally drained of time and energy, how can we help others at *that* point? We cannot. Therefore, boundaries are important, and *excessive* generosity is a sterling example of an area where a person has no boundary.

Gratefulness—what exactly is it? Here’s an excellent definition, which it would behoove us to commit to memory. *Gratitude or gratefulness is learning to recognize the blessings and the benefits which God and others have provided.*

At this juncture, we can learn more about gratefulness if we take a look at some of the related character qualities and their corresponding negative traits. I will now list eight separate character qualities which are related to gratefulness and with each one I will list some corresponding misuses of those positive qualities (a.k.a, virtues).

Going back to what I said previously about how we can incorporate this into our daily life, if we see a person manifesting some of the following negative traits, we can use it either as evidence to condemn that person in our mind, or we can use that observation of his or her negative behavior as a clue as to how we might be able to gently nudge or suggest a better course.

At the same time, I am not suggesting in any way that we are to manipulate or control people. Parents, obviously, DO have a responsibility to train their children, but when we are speaking of our relationships with others, then we must be certain that our words to them come forth gently out of a pure heart and a desire to see Christ growing in that other person—without us being pushy or overbearing.

So here is the first positive trait related to gratitude: *Contentment*. In a special seminar designed to

train men how to be godly fathers, Gothard had a section which is headed with this statement: If a father wants to be an effective spiritual leader, he must have these seven skills. And the very first one he lists is: A father must be in a continual state of *gratefulness* to the Lord.

A father can be sure that if he fails to express genuine gratefulness to those in his own family for the efforts they make (large or small), they will cease to make the effort. A further benefit of a father’s gratefulness is that it will promote an atmosphere of gratefulness within the home. His family will learn how to express their gratefulness *as they see him doing it*.

It states this about contentment. A basic aspect of gratefulness is a spirit of contentment. This involves the ability to stop and enjoy the accomplishments of the family. If a father constantly urges his family on to more achievement and does not stop to them and himself to enjoy what they have done, they will get discouraged and want to give up trying. They will feel they can never do enough to please him, so why try?

I daresay that we have all heard many people—perhaps you are one of them—who has said this about their father—or even their mother: “I could never please him enough. He was never satisfied. Anything I did or accomplished was never good enough for him.”

To reiterate this point, as part of developing the fruit of gratefulness, we must have a spirit of contentment. In other words, we demonstrate gratefulness when we stop and allow ourselves *and others* to enjoy the fruits of our labor.

In the book of the prophet Micah, we find this principle set forth. It speaks of the millennial kingdom, the coming “Golden Age” of the Stone Kingdom. The millennial kingdom will not be a 1,000 year vacation, you know. People will work; but they will also be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor. They will have contentment.

**Micah 3:3 And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.**

**4 But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them**

**afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it.**

Incidentally, this principle of a man sitting under his vine and *his* fig tree is a clear implication of the rights of private property, isn't it? It totally demolishes the antichristian idea of communism. More to our topic though, the sitting under the vine and under the fig tree speaks of resting from our labor and enjoying the fruits thereof.

Conversely, if we do not allow for contentment, then we will find the negative evidences of *apathy* and *resignation*. Resignation is when a person has an attitude which displays a total submission to whatever happens, having no care or concern, having no initiative to act or to strive to meet a goal.

It makes me wonder if we as a society have not failed dreadfully in the area of gratefulness and contentment as evidenced simply by the phrase which is uttered daily by millions of teenagers—and even many adults now—when they dismiss whoever is speaking to them with the single word “Whatever...”

Doesn't that indicate a severely apathetic and resigned attitude? A mother asks her son: “Johnny, will you take out the trash?” And Johnny shrugs his shoulders with disgust, and simply says “Whatever...” Could that apathetic attitude point to the possibility that the parents have not expressed gratitude for previous accomplishments—even if they are for the most menial and mundane of household chores?

So if you see those traits of apathy and resignation in your children or in others, you might begin to suspect it has something to do with a failure to practice gratitude and contentment. Another trait related to gratefulness is *Enthusiasm*.

Enthusiasm is a strong passion or excitement for an object, or for an idea or a cause. Again, we can understand that if a child—or an employee, for that matter—if they are assigned a task and they tackle it with enthusiasm, but then they are never rewarded with even so much as a thank you, then eventually the time will come when they are given an assignment and they might go in one of several negative directions.

They could become apathetic, as we discussed above; or they might go to the extreme opposite of apathy by becoming fanatical, overbearing, and/or

aggressive. In other words, they become a very unpleasant person to be around.

Let's bring the third positive quality in here now because it is closely related in the negative way. The positive side is *Service*. But now listen to the misuse of the gift of service. It is when a person becomes pushy, presumptuous and forceful. You see how that relates to overbearing and aggressive? So instead of having someone who serves with a true servant spirit, we find someone who is going to “serve” you *even if you don't have any desire for what they're serving*. They are going to force it on you.

Obviously, this applies far beyond the servers in the restaurant industry. It might be a sales clerk at the local department store. It might be a pushy car salesman or any kind of sales person. It is certainly applicable in the realm of politics where the political leader is going to “serve” the people with his overbearing and obtrusive laws. He's going to force them on the people because “it's for their own good” in his mind. What about in the arena of medicine? Same thing... It's where medical “service” becomes “you will submit and take whatever drugs, treatments, etc. that we tell you to.”

Regrettably, this misuse of the gift of service is especially prevalent in the arena of religion! Where instead of having ministers with true servant hearts, we find pushy preachers and arrogant teachers who are going to force their view of doctrine on you because they are 100 percent certain they have all the truth and nothing but the truth. Have you run across any people like that?

Now, I am not saying that every instance where we find a pushy preacher is an example of a man who never got enough thanks from the congregation. We're not talking about victimhood here. People do have to take personal responsibility for their words and actions.

Does this discussion seem like a long way from gratefulness? Actually, it is not that far from gratitude at all. Perhaps the pushy preacher was not diligent in his own spiritual life to be grateful to God for the truths he *had* been shown and as a consequence his foolish heart was darkened to where he began to believe he was the repository of all truth. Isn't that what the Scripture says? That if we are not grateful to God, then our foolish heart will be darkened? (Romans 1:21)

A fourth trait very closely related to gratefulness is *Humility*...which is one of the major fruits of the spirit in itself. I presented an entire lecture on that subject alone some years ago called *Grace to the Humble*, which is still available on CDs, # 381 & 382. \$15 postpaid.

In relation to gratitude and the responsibilities of fathers, Gothard wrote that a father must constantly remember that God is working with a fallible and weak person—you and me, guys! Past failures are a key means of a father reminding himself that there is no room for pride.

Every father should maintain a “sanctified Hall of Shame” in the back of his mind. Whenever there is a tendency to be critical of a member of his family, he should mentally revisit his own “hall of shame.” And I would add, we can revisit that hall whenever we are tempted to be critical and condemnatory towards anyone, not just family members.

**Exodus 20:5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, ...**

God’s jealousy is righteous. He will not share His glory with another. Whenever a man is praised, he should—at least inwardly—acknowledge that God should receive the praise, and that it is only by His grace that all things are working together for ultimate good.

This spirit of humility must carry over to those in one’s family. A father must emphasize his own need for his wife and each of his children. They need *to be told* that they are needed and loved. And not just once a year on their birthday. Wives and children do not assume it or take it for granted. Fathers need to speak it out loud and in utter sincerity. The family members need to hear that in order for the father to be the spiritual leader that God intends him to be, he needs their help and cooperation. Of course, in family relationships, it works both ways: husbands and fathers also need to hear that they are respected, admired and loved.

A further aspect of humility must be demonstrated by the father in admitting when he is wrong. If the family does not see that the father recognizes his faults, they will immediately translate that as pride. He is too proud to admit he is wrong. They will also

assume that their father does not need them or love them.

Now when we come to the negative traits which are evidences of a *wrong* view of humility, the Gothard Men’s Seminar course material lists these: self-abasing, extreme self-criticism and lack of self confidence. I agree with the latter two. Extreme self-criticism and lack of self confidence fit the template here, but I disagree with their inclusion of self-abasement. Perhaps Mr. Gothard, or whoever wrote this for him, does not understand the meaning of the term self-abasement. I looked it up to make sure that it was not I who was misunderstanding.

To abase oneself means to put oneself lower, and Webster’s’ gives the synonym for the verb “to abase” as “to humble oneself.” Jesus certainly encouraged us to be self-abasing. Because He said in Matthew 23:12 that “... whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble [abase] himself shall be exalted.” Therefore, self-abasement is not a negative trait; it is not a wrong view of humility. Self-abasement is a virtue, and it is NOT a synonym for self-criticism and lack of self-confidence.

This is not to say that there is no such thing as *false* humility; there certainly is. One example would be of the person who puts himself down for the specific purpose of allowing the opportunity for someone else to flatter him and lavish praise on him, which is really not due him at all. That, of course, is not only false humility; it is manipulative and controlling.

We will continue this study next time by examining the last four of the eight traits which are related to gratefulness and which a godly man/husband/father (and all Christians) should strive to possess.

*(To be continued.)*

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