

Sharing Gratitude and Jesus

(by Dale Bennett, August 16, 2009)

Matthew 5:43-48: You have heard that they were told, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But what I tell you is this: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the innocent and the wicked. If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect? Even the tax collectors do as much as that. If you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. There must be no limit to your gratitude, as your heavenly Father’s gratitude knows no bounds.

Luke 10:25-37: A lawyer once came forward to test him by asking: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” That is the right answer,” said Jesus, “Do that and you will have life.”

Wanting to justify his question, he asked, “But who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was on his way from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he was set upon by robbers, who stripped and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest was going down that same road, and when he saw him, he went past on the other side. So too a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him went past on the other side. But a Samaritan who was going that way came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved to pity. He went up and bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine. Then he lifted him on to his own beast, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. Next day he produced two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper and said, “Look after him; and if you spend more, I will repay you on my way back.” Which of these three do you think was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He answered, “The one who showed him kindness.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do as he did.”

Luke 17:11-19: In the course of his journey to Jerusalem he was traveling through the borderlands of Samaria and Galilee. As he was entering a village he was met by ten men with leprosy. They stood some way off and called out to him, “Jesus, Master, take pity on us.” When he saw them he said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests; and while they were on their way, they were made clean. One of them, finding himself cured, turned back with shouts of praise to God. He threw himself down at Jesus feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. At this Jesus said: Were not all ten clean? The other nine, where are they? Was no one found returning to give praise to God except this foreigner? And he said to the man, “Stand up and go on your way; your faith has cured you.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

There is a person living today that exemplifies the grateful Samaritan leper in Luke’s account of the curing of the ten lepers, but only one takes the trouble to share his gratitude.

Today’s grateful example is a prolific author who has had a book published about every year and a half since 1962, and he has been a professor at Duke University since 1958 where he is the James B. Duke Professor of English. I’d like you to meet Reynolds Price. He was born in Macon, NC (halfway between Henderson and Roanoke Rapids) and educated at Duke University and Oxford.

We’ll benefit to know about Reynolds Price’s way of sharing his gratitude. He is known as one of Christianity’s most eloquent outlaws. He isn’t a churchgoer. One thing he remembers growing up in the south is he never heard a sermon condemning segregation. He’s documented some of his studies in a book titled Three Gospels.

It was while teaching a university course on the gospels of Mark and John that Price translated Mark and John from the Greek, and provided a third gospel of his own making. To me, Reynolds Price, even though earning his label as an “outlaw Christian”, knows Jesus fully and personally.

Recently he authored a book titled Letter To a Godchild. This is a letter that sketches the crucial rules which faith had played in Price’s own life and whittled down those lessons he feels were most valuable.

With no trace of self-pity, he explains how his faith grew and deepened when in 1984 – after a life of robust health – he suffered a cancer that eventually led to paralysis of his lower body.

By way of his painful experience with cancer of the spine he wrote a moving account of lying on his back, in great fear and suffering in Duke Hospital. It was on that hospital bed that he writes that he “discovered the great difference between an efficient ‘medical professional’ and an ‘everyday saint’ as he contrasts the behavior of his world-renowned cancer specialist with the actions and care of those calm women nurses who would answer his calls in the pre-dawn hours of his painful stay.” Price writes that he didn’t ask for much – just a bit of human concern and kindness, but it was the nurses, not the specialists, who could blend their professional code with human care through simple looks and words that award a suffering creature his or her dignity.

As well as showing the need of gratitude to God, the stories of the grateful cured leper who shared his gratitude with shouts of praise to God, and the grateful Reynolds Price penning his gratitude to the nurses, illustrates the nature of faith. It is also the sort of thankful response to God’s grace which makes a person well; it is faith which saves.

Almost three years ago on the morning of October 10, 2006, a 33-year-old milk truck driver from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania affectionately hugged his two oldest children as they boarded the school bus. He made a brief stop at a hardware store before driving his pickup truck to the front door of a one-room Amish schoolhouse near the hamlet of Nickel Mines. What happened next defies imagination. After ordering most of the building's inhabitants to leave, the man tied the ten Amish schoolgirls together on the floor. Then, as police gathered outside the school, Charles Carl Roberts IV systematically shot the ten little children, ultimately killing five of them before taking his own life.

What stunned the watching world in the days following the Nickel Mines shooting was less the horrific violence than the response of the Amish community. Within hours of the tragedy, various Amish spokespersons, including members of the families directly affected by the massacre, were speaking the language of forgiveness.

At this point, can you see and feel Matthew's scripture, a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, being lived out by the Amish? Jesus told the people, "You love your enemies and pray for your persecutor." We would probably ask, "But Jesus, why do I have to forgive when it hurts so much?"

The evening of the violent day, a steady stream of Amish visitors came to the home of Amy Roberts, the widow of the gunman, to offer condolences. "Stay in your home here," an Amish delegation told her shortly thereafter. "We have forgiven your husband... and we share in your sorrow." "We shouldn't think evil of the man who did this," ... a Grandfather of one of the victims admonished children standing at the grave, "He, too, is a child of God." Half of the people who attended the burial of Charles Carl Roberts IV were Amish.

Two bank funds were established – one for the Amish families and one for the Roberts family. The Amish Accountability Committee contacted the Roberts family, and then designated funds in the Amish Fund for the killer's widow. The Roberts Family Fund was being handled by the Coatesville Savings Bank. As an "English" man (that's what the Amish call us) stood in line to make a donation to the Roberts Family Fund, the two people in line behind him were Amish.

Some Amish made special efforts to speak publicly about the foundation of their faith. The father of one of the children who was killed emphasized that "God is the one who should get the blessing in this when it's all over and done. It should be God, not us." The parents of another girl who died in the schoolhouse wrote a letter to a Lancaster newspaper saying, "It is only through our faith in Jesus Christ that forgiveness is possible. He is the one who deserves the praise and the glory."

I'm once again reading the book Amish Grace – How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy. It directs me to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapters 5, 6, & 7, which in a real sense is the Amish Bible. There are two verses that stand out today. Today's scripture from Matthew, the closing verse is, "There must be no limit to your gratitude, as your heavenly Father's gratitude knows no bounds." Then from the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:15, "If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

The teachings in Matthew and in the Sermon on the Mount provide the foundation for the Amish to share their abundance of gratitude as in their tragic situation accompanied by forgiveness unconditionally.

As you ponder the Biblical stories of "love your enemies and pray for your persecutors," and the Good Samaritan, along with the cured leper who shared his gratitude with shouts of praise to God while reflecting on the gratitude and faith of author and professor Reynolds Price as he suffered pain and fear with cancer of the spine, and then the Amish tragedy where they exemplified to the world of how to "love your enemies with 'absolute forgiveness'", it would do well to introduce a gospel song that has a way of endorsing today's message.

A prominent businessman in the small town of Lumerton, NJ was the best singer in church and probably in the whole community. His son worked in his father's business all of his life. He also became ordained as a Methodist preacher, so he often preached in one of the small Methodist churches in the area. But he could never sing like his father could sing. However, when he was 36 years old, he counted his blessings and discovered another talent. He could write songs, and for the next three decades he wrote four or five new gospel songs each week. He didn't want any money for them, but his publisher insisted, so Johnson Oatman, Jr. finally agreed to accept one dollar per song.

The song for today is...

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed
When you are discouraged thinking all is lost
Count your many blessings, name them one by one
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.
Count your blessings...*

And then share your gratitude and Jesus.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.