



The Debt of Gratitude

My daughter wanted to go to a friend's house, but she first needed to complete a set of chores that she had been putting off for a few days. So, she rushed through her chores and declared that she was ready to go. However, when I checked on her chores, I discovered that she really did a poor job, trying to meet the bare minimum requirement of being "finished." I told her that we would leave for her friend's house once her chores were done properly. Unfortunately, this escalated into a heated back-and-forth about what was "good enough." Finally, her chores were completed in an acceptable way and we left for her friend's house.

Almost as soon as we got on the road, my daughter took out her phone and put in her earbuds. She didn't even make an effort to talk to me until we got about five minutes away from her friend's house. When I dropped her off, she mumbled out a "thank you" and ran to her friend's house.



On the drive home, I was irritated. More than irritated, I was seething with anger. I began thinking and praying about what was bothering me so much. The obvious answer was that, despite my daughter's perfunctory "thank you," her entire attitude lacked gratitude. As I thought and prayed, the Holy Spirit turned the question back on me (as He often does). How grateful am I for the good things in my own life, like the fact that my daughter did complete her chores? Did I show her any gratitude?

Why is gratitude so important?

Theologian Dietrich Von Hildebrand teaches some insightful things about the virtue of gratitude. Here are a few powerful points that he makes:

1. Gratitude means understanding the value of the benefit you've received.
2. Gratitude also means that you understand the beneficence of the giver - that the gift or service communicates love or regard.
3. Loving relationships are not based on a tit-for-tat exchange of goods, but they are based on an assurance of mutuality. In other words, I am able to freely offer myself to my loved ones because I know that they will in turn freely offer themselves to me. Loving is about giving and receiving. Gratitude builds loving relationships because it is an assurance of mutuality. It assures me that I am not being used by the other.
4. Finally, gratitude is good for the one who is grateful! Gratefulness brings us a sense of wholeness when we complete the circle of giving. Gratitude satisfies the debt we sense that we owe for a person's goodness to us.

Gratitude is Justice - Right Relationship

Gratitude is tied to the cardinal virtue of justice - giving to each person what is due. We often think of justice in cold, legal terms. But justice is the virtue of right-relationship. When Von Hildebrand talks about the mutuality of loving relationships and closing the circle of giving, he is talking about justice. When someone does something good for us, we owe that person a debt of gratitude; the acknowledgment of the value of the good given to us, and of the love it represents.

More Than Words

While saying the words “thank you” is very important, some relationships demand more than that for a proper show of gratitude. Saying “thank you” is an act of civility that shows love and respect for anybody. In a loving relationship such as a family or a friendship, it’s a good start. But the mutuality of loving relationships requires something more.

True gratefulness in a loving relationship is a matter of giving and receiving love. Through gratefulness, we acknowledge the value of the gift we have received and the love behind the gift. This part of gratefulness may include the words “thank you.” But we then reciprocate that love through acts of charity.

To grow in the virtue of gratitude, consider how you can reciprocate the love shown to you by your family and friends by reciprocating their love with actions as well as words. **Show** them how much you appreciate their love.

As you grow in the virtue of gratitude, don’t forget the three relationships we owe the most gratitude in. These are debts we could never pay, other than with our gratitude and our love. WE owe gratitude to our parents (the virtue of piety), to our country (the virtue of patriotism), and to God (the virtue of religion).

Loving God, help me make my life a gift of gratitude
to you and to everyone that loves me.

Help me to truly receive the gifts of others
- especially those that are hard to receive-
and the love they express.

Teach me also to give love in return.

Amen.

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