

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Generosity
Without
Expectations

By Greg Albrecht

During the Thanksgiving season several years ago, the leader of a youth group from a prosperous suburb persuaded everyone to help serve meals in an inner-city soup kitchen. Before this volunteer service project, most of these young people had only seen homeless, impoverished locals through their car windows as they and their family drove through a poor part of town.

The teenagers served a predictable Thanksgiving menu of beans, mashed potatoes, yams and turkey to a long line of homeless people.

As they filed past these young people, filling empty plates with generous servings, few of the homeless people made any eye contact with the teens who were serving them a free meal, and fewer

still mumbled a “thank you.”

Then, after all the homeless people enjoyed a delicious meal, the youth group washed all the pots and pans and dishes.

It was a long and hard day for the teenagers. Before their bus picked them up to take them home, the youth leader sat them down and asked them about their impressions of their day of service.

They were exhausted after working all day, and no one said anything, until finally one girl spoke up and said, “I guess I really didn’t like being here—it made me uncomfortable. And then, after all our work, *I guess I would have liked the people we served to be a little more grateful.*”

She was truthful—the people she served were poorly dressed. Some had not bathed for a long time and smelled. Some of them may have

been slightly deranged. A few seemed as if they may have been high on a chemical substance.

The young lady was right—she and all her friends worked hard all day and they received little, if any, appreciation for their work.

“I guess I would have liked the people we served to be a little more grateful.”

Helping Others, Expecting Their Gratitude

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever extended yourself “above and beyond”—

expecting to be thanked in return, only to receive little or no recognition for what you have done? That’s really one of the oft-recurring stories of life, isn’t it?

- As husbands and wives, when we look back on our marriages, we realize that not only did we fail to express our appreciation on many occasions, but there were many times when we were disappointed when our spouse failed to thank us.

- How about parenting? Well, if you expect that your child will ever thank you for each and every act of selfless and sacrificial love you express toward them, then forget about becoming a parent. You will never, as a parent, receive the thanks, gratitude and appreciation equal to all the time, effort and services rendered on your part. It won’t happen, will it?

We didn’t express enough appreciation to our parents, and in

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The Peace of Thanksgiving

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.—Colossians 3:15

Thanksgiving just gets me all warm and tingly and all kinds of wonderful inside.—Willard Scott

There is something magical about a Thanksgiving Day morning. Perhaps it's the fact that Thanksgiving Day is a guaranteed holiday (and the next day too) for most people from the rigors and routine of normal demands of daily life. It's the sense that if you wake up early enough, life as we experience it in the day-to-day seems to become quiet for a while.

Maybe it's the crispness of the autumn air outside, cup of coffee in-hand, out for a long walk. Or, maybe it's the anticipation of the food and family to come. Thanksgiving Day morning, at least for me, has to be the top contender for "most peaceful morning of the year," and I cherish that peace.

Before I go too much further in writing about *The Peace of Thanksgiving*, I readily admit that I can hear any number of friends and family members who do the hard work of preparation for all that food and family to come, saying, "Are you out of your mind?! There's so much to do on a Thanksgiving Day morning!!"

Yes, there certainly is so much to do. Absolutely. However, I'm simply focusing in on the early morning part of the day, and developing the thought from there. And on behalf of all of us who so enjoy the beautiful results of all

that hard work, let us collectively say, "Thank You!"

I can also hear many others insist that there's nothing magical about a Thanksgiving Day morning for them. Their children are grown and live thousands of miles away. They can't leave their assisted-care facility to travel to see them, and seldom does anyone come to visit them, let alone on Thanksgiving Day.

Far greater than the peace of a quiet Thanksgiving morning, the peace of Christ that rules in our hearts is a deeper peace. It is a spiritual peace.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians encourages us to *let* the peace of Christ rule in our hearts...for we were called to peace...and be thankful. Paul's use of the word *let* implies we have a choice, a participation in, the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts.

We can choose to *let* his peace rule, or we can stifle it. We can *let* his peace lead us to a spirit of thanksgiving, or we can deny it. The choice to *let* is ours. Christ Jesus gives us that freedom and invites us to respond in a way that best serves us. Christ Jesus invites us to choose peace and a spirit of thanksgiving.

The peace of Christ does not depend on large family gatherings. The peace of Christ is not all about the hard work that goes into preparing the home and food for those who will come.

Please *let* me ask you a question or two: Can we be uneasy, anxious, worried or even agitated when we

are truly at peace? Can we be lost in negativity or discouragement when we are feeling deeply thankful? I believe the answers to these questions are obvious—we cannot.

I'm not suggesting, however, that it is always easy to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. There are times when it is quite difficult to feel a spirit of thanksgiving.

More often than not, the world around us gives us every opportunity to feel uneasy, anxious, worried and even agitated.

Life on our planet today can lead us to a high degree of negativity, deep loneliness and honest discouragement. The emotions that often build inside of us can create a ground-swell, and we can be carried away. But that's not the end of the story.

As Christ-followers, we celebrate *The Peace of Thanksgiving*. We celebrate the peace we have in Christ Jesus, as we live our lives in him and he lives his life in us. His peace and spirit of thanksgiving give us a *warmth, a tingly wonderful inside*, to borrow Willard Scott's thought. And that peace and spirit of thanksgiving then transforms us, and gives us a different perspective on all we may face in the world around us.

Far greater than the peace of a quiet Thanksgiving Day morning, the peace of Christ that rules in our hearts is a deeper peace. It is a spiritual peace. The spirit of thanksgiving that he gives us is a continual and permanent gift. His thanksgiving is also spiritual.

All we need do is to receive it and *let* it rule within us. As we do, we carry within us a celebration that can last the entire year-round. □

—Ed Dunn

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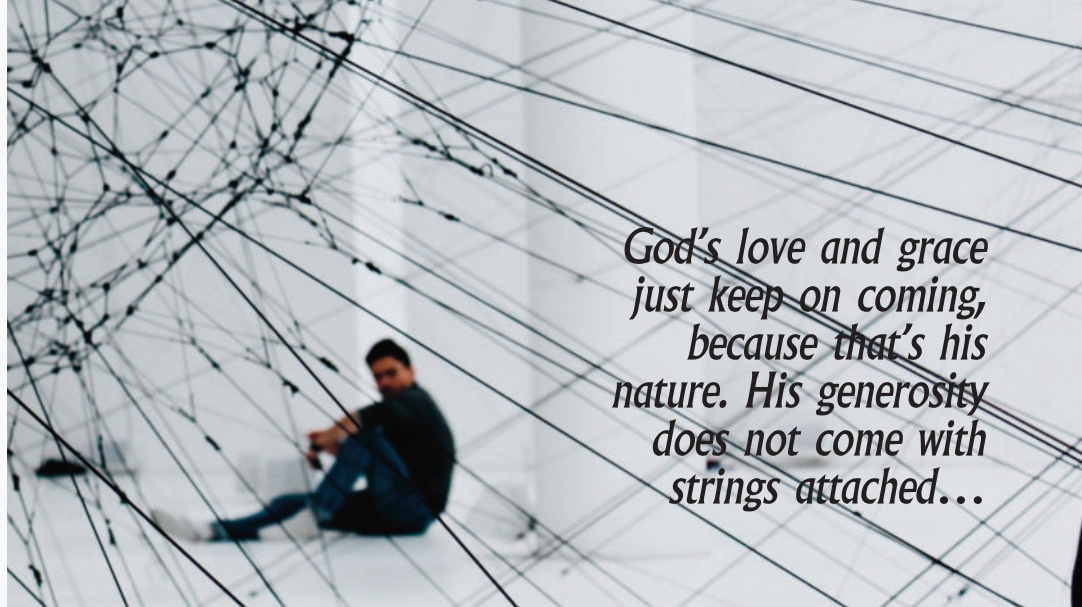
turn, as the cycle of life continues, our children will not express all the gratitude we as parents hope for.

But here's the question—do we give only if we receive a “thank you?” Is the purpose of giving to be gratified by the thankfulness of the person to whom we give? **What about generosity without expectations?**

Generosity without expectations is very much like the grace of God. When Jesus went to his Cross as the supreme demonstration of divine love for all humanity, he knew full well that many, if not most, would never thank him.

Jesus did not sit down at the table with humanity and say, “Okay, here's what I am going to do for you. But before I do, I want some guarantees that the magnitude of the love that I am going to pour out will be noticed and appreciated.”

The night before he was crucified—details of which are recorded in five chapters (13-17) of the Gospel of John—Jesus gives what has been



God's love and grace just keep on coming, because that's his nature. His generosity does not come with strings attached...

called his “final discourse” to his disciples. Here was the perfect opportunity for Jesus to make clear what he expected from his disciples. He could have said to his disciples, “I'm going to do this for you and here's what I expect from you in return.”

Jesus is our perfect example of generosity without expectations.

Grace is Without Expectation of Payback

The grace of God is given, without any payback on our part. The grace of God is lavished on us even though God is fully aware that we are incapable of realizing the staggering implications of his grace and responding in kind.

God's grace is *generosity without expectations*. The grace of God, as it lives in us through the risen Lord Jesus Christ, is grace without any expectation of a return on our “investment” or our efforts.

This dynamic is the reason that so many people don't get God's grace to begin with. When

they hear that God does not love in return for our obedience—when they hear that God's grace cannot be earned—many presume that God is setting himself up for disappointment.

If there are no conditions to God's love and grace, what's to stop human beings from taking and taking and receiving and receiving—without ever truly deserving God's grace and without ever truly giving God the thanksgiving he deserves?

Indeed, that's just what unconditional love means—it means that God's love and grace just keep coming, because that's his nature. His generosity does not come with strings attached, his generosity does not stop if and when people fail to appropriately give him thanks.

That's why it is *amazing* grace—it is grace without expectations. That's real love, that's real grace—without expectations.

- Giving *with* expectation of a return is not grace, it's a business proposition.
- Giving *with* expectation of a return is a contract, not a gift.
- Giving *with* expectation of a return is a quid pro quo— I will help you if I see and hear an appropriate return on my investment. You help me, I'll help you. You pat me on the back, I'll return the favor. That's not grace.
- **Grace is generosity without expectations.**

On our part, generosity without



expectations means that our Christ-centered giving—our service—should not be measured in exact proportion to gratitude we receive. Giving is what we do as Christ-followers—we give without reservations and without conditions.

We don't treat others with respect and generosity only when we think they will return our kindness and gifts. Rather, we love others indiscriminately—when Jesus lives his life in us and we live a life of *generosity without expectations*.

Giving—No Reservations— No Expectation of Recognition

On our part, as Jesus lives in us, generosity without expectations means that our love and our service to others will also continue, it will always flow—as does the river of God's grace—even when we receive little or no recognition.

If and when we stop giving, helping and serving because we do not hear or see much in the way of appreciation and gratitude, that will not mean that people will suddenly start being thankful or begin expressing their gratitude.

Our generosity, love and service (if we are truly in Christ and he is in us) is not conditioned by the amount of thanksgiving we hear and receive. If we are truly in Christ and he is in us, then we will live lives of *generosity without expectations*.

Here are three thoughts to help us be more intentional about thanksgiving—about the gratitude that we make sure we express:

1) Give thanks for the ordinary and the small things. Don't forget to thank those who are close to you (your family and your friends) for little things. Don't assume they know you are thankful. Say it loud and say it often. Send thank-you notes. Give people a call on the phone—even if it is just to say "thank-you."

2) Find ways to be thankful even when times are desperate, even when you are in the middle of adversity. It is much easier to give thanks when everything in our lives is going well—but it's a far different thing to thank God even in the midst of trials and difficulties. For while we obviously are not thankful for suffering and pain, the presence of pain and suffering does not mean that we still have other things for which we can be thankful.

3) Look for ways in which you can help and serve—look for circumstances and people you can reach out to. Maybe you can make someone a meal—maybe you can just call them on the phone and talk, or visit them, helping alleviate their loneliness.

Yield to Jesus who lives his life in you so that your generosity does not depend on expectations of someone recognizing you and thanking you. □

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by Laura Urista

*“...Count your many blessings,
name them one by one, and it will
surprise you what the Lord hath done.”*

This partial lyric from the old familiar hymn by Johnson Oatman, Jr. counsels us to recall our blessings when we are burdened, discouraged or overwhelmed. But we can gain a lot more from “counting our blessings” than just a way of cheering up. Much more than merely “counting” our blessings—if we *remember, focus and meditate on, and intentionally call to mind* the blessings God has provided, our attitudes will change so that our relationships with God and others will improve.

I’ve heard that our brains are wired so that it’s not possible to keep thankful thoughts together with negative feelings of depression, bitterness or anger at the same time. When we choose to count (*focus on, meditate on and intentionally call to mind*) our blessings, it causes a mind-shift—negative feelings like depression, discouragement, anger and bitterness are less important. After a while, thankfulness can start to become our “default” thought pattern and we become generally happier.

A few years ago, a close friend gave me a “blessings jar” for my birthday. I know she intended it as just a

thoughtful gift. But I’m sure she had no idea how much it would truly impact my life. As I started to write down blessings for which I’m thankful and put them inside the jar, something in my perspective began to change for the better! I found that I felt generally happier, and I didn’t dwell on negative things in life or in the world around me. I didn’t get sucked into the “drama” of friends and family relationships as much as I had before I started writing down my blessings.

You may be thinking, *Okay, that’s nice but we don’t really need to write down blessings to remember them.* Yes, that’s true, but like most of us learned in elementary school, writing things down cements information into our brain using a variety of senses and creates a more vivid memory. There’s just something about the act of writing something with our hand (touching the pen or pencil, while looking at what we’re writing and perhaps “listening”) that helps information in our brains become more likely to stick.

One great thing I’ve found from writing down my blessings and putting them in a special place, in this case a “blessings jar,” is that when I’m starting to feel discouraged, overwhelmed, bitter or angry, I just open the jar and read some of the things I’ve written down. My mood

immediately starts to lighten and I feel closer to God and others.

Many people keep a journal or diary for appointments or daily thoughts, and this would also be a great place to write down blessings or thankful thoughts.

These past few years have been incredibly stressful, anxious and discouraging for so many people around the world. Many have lost loved ones, friends, health, homes, income, a sense of safety and security...the list goes on and on.

If you are feeling discouraged, depressed or overwhelmed, perhaps you can’t even bring your mind to focus on any blessings. Maybe you are so discouraged that you can’t even “count” **ONE** blessing in your life.

If that’s the case, just take a baby step. First, **simply thank God that you are alive.** Thank Him for the air in your lungs. Thank Him that you can see the sunshine, feel the breeze on your cheeks, hear a bird chirping and taste a sip of coffee or a bite of food. Then thank him for the color of the sky, the grass, the flowers... that’s enough to start.

Once you begin to recognize and focus on these seemingly insignificant or “normal” blessings of daily life, you will gradually begin to notice more vividly the blessings around you every moment of every day, no matter what your particular circumstances in life. Continue to thank God even for the smallest of blessings, and before long you’ll find you are a generally happier person, easier to be around and overflowing with thankfulness.

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7). □

Laura Urista is managing editor of Plain Truth and CWR magazine.

Infernal... Inter...rup... ...tions!

by Steve Brown



Coffee and Jesus always get me up in the morning. Well, this morning neither was able to make it better. Each morning I go into my office, start the coffee, then walk downstairs to the kitchen to get a large glass of water with ice. Today, when I walked back into my office, I could smell the coffee, and I looked forward to rejoicing in the day that the Lord had made.

That's when I set down the glass of water, accidentally hit it with my hand and knocked it over, spilling water all over my computer, the work on my desk, my chair and my pants. It was sort of like eating a live frog first thing in the morning, so you know that nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day.

Wait. You're telling me that in a world with cancer, a crashing economy, a war in Ukraine, a global pandemic and people dying all over the world, you had a miserable day because you spilled some water?

Of course not! Well...uh...yeah. I'm not so shallow to think that spilled water is the equivalent of cancer, war or death. However, when your pants are wet and your computer won't work, it's hard to remember to put things into perspective!

Now to move from the frivolous to the important. This morning, I thought about interruptions and priorities, and then I thought about Jesus. You've read the story in Matthew 9—Jesus encountered a woman suffering from a discharge of blood for twelve years. At the time, Jesus was headed to the home of a ruler whose daughter was either dying or had died. He had places to go, things to do, God's work to be accomplished, and this woman got in the way.

She knew she was interrupting an important man doing important things, so the woman sneaked up behind Jesus, thinking she could steal her healing. *If I can just touch his coat-tail, she thought, I'll be healed.* And she was. In fact, Jesus was pleased that she came to him and said to her, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has healed you" (Matthew 9:22). But this woman was not on Jesus' *To-Do List* for that day.

Does that ever happen to you? Your day is planned and doable, and then something or someone gets in the way. Maybe it's a spilled glass of water, or

demands of family, or an accident, or a pleasant surprise—or a tragedy. The train was moving along just fine and then it gets knocked off the rails.

There's an old pastor's prayer that has more reality to it than the punch line would suggest: "Lord, I could do my job if it weren't for all these people." Maybe so, unless, of course, the people ARE your job.

What do we do with these infernal interruptions? The first thing is to remember that God is the God of interruptions. In Acts 27, Paul found himself called to an unexpected trip to Rome, which started with the interruption of his arrest in Jerusalem. And on the way to Rome, there was a shipwreck—an interruption of an interruption.

The Bible is full of interruptions from Genesis to Revelation.

James wrote "Come now, you who say, 'today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town, spend a year there and make a profit'—whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance..." (James 4:13-16, NKJV).

But there is more than just recognizing the God we serve is a God of interruptions. We must also learn to set aside the irritation and be thankful for the interruptions. Paul wrote that we are to be "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything" (Ephesians 5:20). It's a radical and counterintuitive thought.

That brings me to Thanksgiving. Holidays irritate me. Do you know why? Because they are interruptions, that's why! It's a day lost in a busy week and one has to work twice as hard the day before Thanksgiving and the day after Thanksgiving just to do what needs to be done. Why can't we just say a Thanksgiving prayer or something?

It doesn't matter what the "interruption" is...life is all about Him. He loves us and he has it all in control. I'm going to try and remember that and be thankful for these infernal interruptions! ☐

Steve Brown is a pastor, author, professor and the president of Key Life Network.



In Plane Site

I recently went to see an accountant whose office I'd never been to. In the lobby I glanced through the directory three or four times, but couldn't find him. Was he listed under another name? Was I in the wrong building? I phoned him. "Where are you?" He verified that he was in the same building I was. I looked again at the directory. Still nothing. I climbed the stairs, wandered around and found his office anyway.

"By the way, your name is missing from the directory downstairs," I informed him. "You really should get that fixed. Your clients will be confused."

He followed me downstairs, and to my astonishment, there, in plain sight, in the same directory I had searched only minutes ago, was his name. He turned his head and regarded me with one eyebrow cocked.

"Well," I tried to explain, "there's a space under your name, which makes it seem to be part of the directory heading. That's why I didn't notice it, and just looked at the list below..."

"Uh-huh," he said.

"Okay," I said sheepishly, "I guess I was confused."

On the way home, I thought of my decades in publication design and editing. There were always hundreds of errors our meticulous proofreaders caught. But a few times we had major mistakes (misspelled headlines or photo captions switched) detected just in the nick of time before printing (or after!). These devious errors had hidden themselves in plain sight, evading the eyes of seasoned professionals. We just didn't expect to see big, obvious errors like this, so we didn't look for them.

When I don't expect something to be in a certain place, that's always the last place I look in the kitchen, garage or living room. This principle seems to apply to keys, TV remotes, garage door openers, cell phones, billfolds, glasses, tools, uncashed checks, credit cards, you name it—and I think it also applies to life.

Ponder with me for a moment—you might not expect to find anything good or

thankworthy about aging, about sickness or disability, about the loss of family and friends, about unemployment, about war, about natural disasters. Okay, this is grim, which is why we don't like to dwell on this stuff. But keep pondering anyway.

I didn't expect anything good about being old, but I'm thankful for a relatively long life. I didn't expect anything good about sickness, but I'm thankful it motivates me to take better care of myself. I didn't expect anything good about the loss of family or friends, but I'm thankful for having known and loved so many great people. A few lean years taught frugality and resourcefulness (and thankfulness that we may later be in a position to help those in need). War years taught an appreciation of peace. Natural disasters taught gratefulness for times of safety and the times we have been spared from such calamities. There's plenty to be thankful for in places we least expect.

Before you think I'm just reciting the old saying "every cloud has a silver lining," let me suggest that we're talking about much more than a silver lining.

"My Christian brothers, you should be happy when you have all kinds of tests. You know these prove your faith. It helps you not to give up. Learn well how to wait so you will be strong and complete and in need of nothing." (James 1:2-4, New Life Version). I like the clarity of this translation. The gist is that Christ-followers are not immune from troubles. Troubles are a necessary part of this physical life and Jesus uses them to infuse us with his patience.

Sometimes we've made requests of God and we think he hasn't responded, because they weren't answered where and how we expect. Maybe we've given up and we regard them as never received or totally lost. Or maybe we're just confused. Perhaps we should take a look in the places we least expect. Maybe many great gifts from God have already been there for quite a while right under our noses—in plain sight (or plane site). □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"In ordinary life, we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich."—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"Reflect on your present blessings, of which every man has many, and not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some."—Charles Dickens

"Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it."—William Arthur Ward

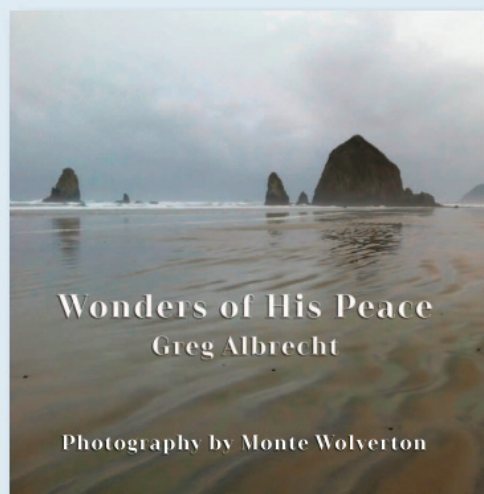
"It was thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away, but it is a visit that for all our madness and cynicism and despair we have never quite forgotten. The oxen in their stalls. The smells of hay. The shepherds standing around. That child and that place are somehow the closest of all encounters. This story that faith tells in fairytale language is not just that God is, which God knows is a lot to swallow in itself much of the time, but that God comes. Comes here. 'In great humility.' There is nothing much humbler than being born: naked, helpless, not much bigger than a loaf of bread. He visited us. The world has never been quite the same since."—From *The Clown in the Belfry*, by Frederick Buechner

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