

Thankfulness – Praise - Help us Hear God

Psalm 100, 95:1-7, 96, 103 Readings

Growing up, toward the end of the Cold War with Russia, the nuclear threat, having school drills where we hid under our school desks, the all encompassing fear of Communism, and being with relatives and Christians, who prayed at every gathering, “Thank you God that we can worship in freedom,” was hard for me to fully understand. But this automatic habit, of being thankful for religious freedom, along with all the other freedoms we have in North America, is something we should be grateful for. The society we live in provides this.

But many other societies do not. For a while it seemed that more and more countries were opening up, having more freedoms, but today, we hear about countries restricting freedoms. In many countries, corruption is so rampant, including government officials, if it’s not destroying their economic system, like Venezuela, its reducing opportunity for ordinary individuals to financially prosper.

Here is one headline: Nigeria’s stressed-out middle-class is trying to leave in droves and the destination is Canada. Why? For many, that desire to leave, is borne out of growing frustrations with living in a country where basic amenities can often be a luxury, despite the trappings of a middle-class life. People are tired of irregular electricity, long waits in gas lines, unreliable medical care and so on.

Other examples include: Increasingly, in many countries, Christians and other faiths, are not allowed to evangelize, or have laws that greatly restrict and punish those sharing the gospel. But Canada stands fourth in Freedom House’s 2018 list of countries that are the most free – as they measure freedom.

When we look around us, and at the world, many people, are constantly frustrated by the society they live in. Like the Arab Spring movement that affected people in over 12 countries. It was sparked by the first protests

that occurred in Tunisia on December 18, 2010, following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest of police corruption & ill treatment. His anger spread across the Arab world.

People were finally fed up with their living conditions and wanted to bring down their dictatorial, harsh governments that provided few economic opportunities as well as political freedoms. The early hopes that these popular movements would end corruption, increase political participation, and bring about greater economic equity quickly collapsed in the wake of increased repression. People can work hard but never get ahead because the system they live in works to repress and control them.

The reality is, people have different starting points in life. We live in different systems. But even in the same country, people do not have equal opportunities or equal starting points. We know the quality of our parenting; the competence of our teachers and school systems; the availability of affordable health care; adequate food so our minds and bodies develop as they should; the presence of all the facets of infrastructure; encouragement and mentoring from others; opportunities with good timing; good friends; benefiting from good laws and government; work opportunities with kind and fair employers; a go getter habit and attitude; and sometimes luck; are just some of the factors that allow us, and even encourage us to be “self-made, self reliant,” persons. And we can not deny that some people are simply better at seeing and grasping opportunities.

So as much as we value, and should value, and expect the ideas of, a self made person, the Protestant work ethic, pull yourself up by your own boot straps, and being independent, we know that some people simply have it easier because of the system they are in, as well as how the people around them support them.

There are many factors when we look at the reasons someone is successful. Even though we value self reliance, not a one of us is self made. Each of us have a different history, a

different make up, different opportunities, and different starting points. This YouTube video helps us grasp this reality.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K5fbQ1-zps>

Jesus said, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (Luke 12:48) So to end our series of sermons on hearing God, I want to suggest, a habit of gratitude helps us hear God. It's a muscle we need to exercise. It is easy to forget our blessings and so we must cultivate a constant attitude of thanksgiving. And it's too easy to be blaming and judgmental and accusing toward others.

I Thessalonians 5 reminds us, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (16-18) Hebrews urges us, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that openly profess his name." (13:15)

Thankfulness toward God draws us closer to our Redeemer. Appreciation toward Jesus gives us proper perspective. As you see from the paper in your mail box, gratitude simply is good for us in many ways. And maybe most of all, praise helps the Holy Spirit keep us from making our own selves into idols. Gratitude is an overlooked habit to help us hear and listen and then respond to our Almighty Creator.

I share these thoughts to remind us, no person is an island, to help us be careful we don't make ourselves idols and to help us become more thankful. And part of our discipleship as we follow Jesus is to pass on, to encourage and teach people to work hard, but also help people prosper, to provide opportunities - like we do with refugees, our own relatives, VBS, the Thrift Store, Bible Studies, supporting schools, and all the other ways and places we help build people as well as help them meet Jesus.

I don't believe anyone is fully self-made or self-reliant because we live in a world of relation-

ships that help us or hinder us or harm us. But we have much to be grateful for. Plus God blesses us in so many ways as our scriptures today declare. Even more than we realize. So we need to be less condemnatory and more compassionate. We need to be slower to criticize until we learn all the facts about people's work habits, opportunities, their background, & the system they live in. We need to be more merciful in our opinions and more grateful as we understand that often hard work isn't enough for success. There are factors often beyond our control.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, who I think we would agree could be labeled a success was an Austrian immigrant who hustled his bodybuilding stardom into a lucrative movie career, from which he launched a successful bid to become the governor of California, making millions along the way.

In a speech recently at University of Houston graduates he shared about some of the help he had received during his careers. I quote: "I didn't just materialize out of nowhere like the Terminator through a fireball in the streets of Los Angeles, and then all of a sudden I was there. No. I would have never made it in my life without the help." For example: "There's 280 people that work on a movie that make you look great on that screen, so how can I say I'm a self-made man?" "My life has taken a lot of help. None of us can make it alone."

Arnold continues: "I always tell people that you can call me any thing that you want. But don't ever, ever, call me the self-made man." "To pose as a self-made man would discount every single person that has helped me get here today, that gave me advice, that made an effort, that lifted me up when I fell."

He continues: "It is not true that I am self-made. Like every one, to get to where I am, I stood on the shoulders of giants. My life was built on a foundation of parents, coaches, and teachers; of kind souls who lent couches or

gym back rooms where I could sleep; of mentors who shared wisdom and advice; of idols who motivated me from the pages of magazines (and, from personal interactions).

“I had a big vision, and I had fire in my belly. But I would never have gotten anywhere without my mother helping me with my homework (and smacking me when I wasn’t ready to study), without my father telling me to “be useful,” without teachers who explained how to sell, or without coaches who taught me the fundamentals of weight lifting.” And I have to wonder, would Arnold have had the conditions and opportunities to succeed in Austrian society as much as he did in the United States?

Arnold told the graduating class that while they should be proud of their diplomas, they shouldn't make the mistake of thinking they achieved their dreams without any help.

Gratitude helps us hear God – because it reminds us how dependent we really are on where we live – the culture, government, opportunities, other people, and so on. And we are especially dependent on our Savior.

The concept that we are self made – is true to an extent. But so is the recognition that the community we live in, nurtures us, strengthens us and gives us opportunities – or not. But most of all, and please take this home with you, making the concepts of self reliance an idol, gets in the way of the habit of gratitude – especially toward our Creator and Redeemer. Plus, we receive and develop many benefits from having thankful heads, hearts, spirits, hands, feet and voices.

Gratitude is the most effective way to deepen our consciousness to the fact that we are the object of God’s affection and love. Praise God – it’s good habit, because it puts ourselves in our rightful place, and it helps us be more open to hear our Savior. The secret of a happy life is staying thankful for our blessings. It’s like a muscle to keep our faith strong. Have a blessed thanksgiving.