

“Always in Debt”

One of the most dramatic stories in the Old Testament is found in 2 Kings, chapters 6 & 7. Syria, the enemy of Israel, has besieged the capital city of Samaria. Troops surround the city. Food supplies are cut off. The people are beginning to starve. It is so horrible that a pint of dove’s dung sold for more than \$3.00 (they ate the dung!). A donkey’s head cost about \$45 (not \$45 in *today’s money!*). It was such a holocaust that people resorted to cannibalism! Chapter 6, verses 26-30 tells how 2 women make an agreement to boil and eat a son of each woman. The first lady did that, but the second lady hid her son and didn’t keep the agreement, with the other mother then complaining to the king.

There are 4 lepers outside the gate of the city. They too experienced the hopelessness of the situation. At this point they reason, “If we stay here, we’re going to die. If we try to get into the city, we’re also going to die. So, let’s walk to the camp of our enemy and surrender. Even if they kill us, that’s no worse than what we’re going to experience anyway.

So, they head off to the camp of the Syrian army. Quietly, fearfully they approach the enemy camp. But there’s a strange, eerier silence. No sound of weapons. No neighing of horses. No loud talk or coarse joking among soldiers. Everything is still. To their amazement, they discover that the *camp is empty*. The tents are pitched, there’s food left on tables. The campfires are still burning. But no troops. No army. For somehow, *just as the prophet Elisha had predicted*, God had done something to cause terror to spread throughout the camp, and the enemy troops had left in a hurry!

The 4 men look at each other in disbelief! “Are we dreaming?” “Can this be true?” All of a sudden they rush to the tables and begin to wolf down the food. They then run into the tents and begin snatching expensive gold and silver jewelry, grabbing armfuls of fine linen, then hiding it nearby, and coming back for more. It’s like winning the lottery, hitting the jackpot – big time! *Has this been a day or what!*

*And then it dawns on them.....*One of the lepers lowers his head and quietly remarks, “Wait a minute...what we’re doing is wrong, and selfish...this is a day of good news, and we are silent” (verse 9). Their minds quickly shift from their own good fortune to their fellow Israelites back in the city – starving, dying. And so, they return to the besieged city and share the good news with their neighbors.

What happened here? Four men – lepers, outcasts, starving, hopeless human beings in desperation sought mercy from an enemy, and quietly stumbled onto a gold mine. Food and riches had been graciously put in their laps.

In a sense, all of us are like these 4 men. We have stumbled into life, enjoying many benefits that have come from the hands of others.

Think of the debt we owe to our parents. I am sensitive to the fact that some of us here may not have had the benefit of caring, loving parents. And this can leave a deep scar in our life. But most of us owe a great debt to our parents. From the first moment we breathed, they nurtured

us – a helpless baby – they protected and sheltered and cared for us. The time, energy care, money and love they poured into our life, maybe even doing without things themselves, often with little thanks from us. I know firsthand of a situation where loving parents raised their son, in addition to the normal expenses of raising children, they spent tens of thousands of dollars on this son because of an addiction – and something didn't suit him, and he has turned on his mother (the father has died), and essentially disowned her.

My father died of cancer. And while the 2 years or so that he fought this disease were difficult for all of us, it gave me time to say thanks. I made a conscious effort to tell my dad how much I appreciated all he had done to try to raise me right, and for all he had given me. The last few days of my mom's life, I made the effort to get through to her how thankful I was that she was a good mom. I could never repay them for what they did for me.

Think of the debt we owe to our nation. The early settlers who braved the oceans in small vessels to establish this land. Pioneers, who braved the unknown during the westward migration, across mountains and deserts and prairies, to expand the boundaries of the new nation.

Now I realize that our American history in some ways has been sanitized and idealized, overlooking some horrible things. What we did to Native Americans, how we made slaves of black human beings. Certainly, our history doesn't have the warm feeling and rosy perspective for African Americans and Native Americans, and others who immigrated to our country, as it does for some of us. But does this mean that we trash our country, and fail to see what's good about it? It's like throwing the baby out with the bathwater! Frankly, I get tired of those who constantly bad mouth our country. Go live somewhere else if you're so unhappy here. Go live in Iran, or Afghanistan, or China. Go live in Kenya, and see how blessed and fortunate we are!

We celebrated Veterans Day recently. Think of the debt we owe to the thousands of men and women who served our country, many of whom were wounded, or lost their lives, preserving the freedoms we so often take for granted. Can we ever repay them for the debt we owe? Can we ever repay all of the hard working, creative, visionary people who helped make this country great in so many ways?

Think of the intellectual debt we owe to others. The *teachers* along the way who shared their knowledge and placed in us an appreciation for education and a thirst for learning. The *authors* who've written books that have enriched our lives and opened up new worlds to us. I don't even remember the names of many of my teachers and professors who along the way helped teach me to think, and to value knowledge and learning. I think of the very tall, thin, somewhat shy teacher at McCaskey who taught typing class. I took the typing class as a senior because it was a breeze and involved no homework. But I learned to type there – and boy, have I ever used that throughout my career, as I've spent thousands and thousands of hours at a typewriter or computer. I remember he was left-handed, like me, but I don't even remember his name!

Think how indebted we are to our spiritual mentors and leaders. Those first century Christians

who laid the foundation for our faith, and shared the infant gospel in an often hostile world. The martyrs who died for their faith, often in shameful ways: drowned, beheaded, burned alive, even murdered then eaten by cannibals – to spread the message Jesus' love to those who didn't deserve it.

There's William Tyndale. In the early 1500's his passion was to translate the Bible into English, to get the Bible in the hands of the people (not just the clergy). For that, he was arrested, and spent months in filthy prisons. Finally, he was brought to trial. His crime: "Maintaining that faith alone justifies...that to believe in the forgiveness of sins, and to embrace the mercy offered in the gospel, was enough for salvation." Finally, he was led to his place of execution. Tied to a stake, surrounded by brush and logs, the executioner snapped a rope tight, strangling him, before his body was consumed by fire. We have a tremendous heritage of people like this, and thousands of lesser known Christians - heroes of the faith, who kept the light of the gospel burning for theirs, and future generations!

If you and I know Christ as our Savior, and if there's any spiritual depth in our lives, it's probably because someone cared enough to share Christ with us: the Sunday School teacher, perhaps Christian parents, the pastor who took an interest in us, believed in us, inspired us. I owe a great debt to the Christians who've nurtured and encouraged me along the way over all these years. We could go on and on.

Every once in a while you hear about someone who has had some great achievement in their life, some successful individual, and that person is held in esteem as a "self-made man" or a "self-made woman." *Really?* Think about it: Is there anything in life that you have achieved, anything you have, that has not come directly or indirectly from the hand of someone else? That's not to say we can't work hard to develop skills, accomplish noteworthy things, gain success because of our efforts. But it's still a fundamental truth that so much of what we have has been *given to us* by someone else. And of course, from the hand of God. Like those 4 lepers in the story, we stand at the camp of life, riches before us, which we didn't earn or even ask for!

In short, we are always in debt! We've received from the hands and the hearts of other people, and from God, much more than we can ever repay. Do you see what I'm saying? And when this sinks it, it will produce a certain attitude towards life.

It will make us humble. *Pride* sets in when we lose the sense of the *givenness* of life. This kind of prideful attitude is expressed in a story Jesus told about a rich farmer. "Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"'" (Luke 12:16-20).

Notice how this man majored in "I" and "my"! I will do this, I will do that. *My* crops, *my* barns,

my grain, my goods, my soul. He's so self-absorbed that there's no sense of being indebted to anyone else for his wealth and success. Some people are like that today!

Humility follows when we realize we're always in debt for what we've been given. Think, for instance, of a great recording star – a pop singer, a celebrated opera singer, a country music star. Often these people get all the fame and all the money. But think of all that goes in to a great recording. The person who wrote the song, the one who arranged the music, the musicians who accompany the singer, the backup singers, the sound technicians, and everybody who invented the musical instruments and the technology of our day. *And God*, who gave the voice! I could practice till the cows come home and work my tail off, but I'll never be a famous singer because God didn't give me that kind of voice. 1 Corinthians 4:7 says, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" *Realizing we are always in debt to others, and to God, make us humble.*

It also makes us thankful. Switch back to Jesus' story of the rich farmer. There's no evidence of gratitude! Why should he be grateful? He gained his wealth all by himself (or so he thought). His attitude is so different from that of the 4 lepers who came into the Syrian camp. Being thankful is not just something we do once a year on Thanksgiving Day, or when something especially nice happens to us. Real thanksgiving is a daily attitude, a way of life, generated by the realization that we owe a debt of gratitude to all those who've helped and blessed us along the way, and to God.

Realizing we'll always be in debt to others, and to God, will also make us *generous*. Notice the words of one of the lepers: "This day is a day of good news...and we are silent" (2 Kings 7:9). Their first impulse was to grab and hoard the spoil for themselves, but then they realized they had an obligation to share. Again, how different from the rich farmer. His problem was where to store his bumper crop. Well, giving some of it away would have alleviated that problem!

I think one of the underlying reasons why people (including Christians) are reluctant to give generously and sacrificially is because we fail to understand at an emotional level that so much of what we have or what we've accomplished has been because someone has been willing to give good things to us!

If I've received because of the generosity of others, and the Lord, how can I be selfish? Jesus picked up on that. He told His disciples, as they were being sent out two by two, to preach and teach and heal: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). That's it, in a nutshell! Freely we have received. Freely give!

So, do we get it? Really? We're always in debt, and we can never fully pay back to those who've given to us. And when this really sinks in, we'll be *humble...and thankful... and generous*.

