

Play With GRATITUDE

I've been missing baseball. This pandemic has cancelled the professional baseball season so far. To me, it feels like it just can't be springtime if there's no baseball.

So to get my fix, I've been watching in bits and pieces this long TV series on the history of baseball. And I've learned about one of the greatest moments in baseball history, which happened on July 4, 1939.

At the beginning of the 1939 season, New York Yankees star, Lou Gehrig, just wasn't feeling himself. He couldn't control his arms and legs like he wanted to. Doctors took weeks to study what was wrong. Finally they discovered that he had a disease called Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). It was clear that his stellar career was over immediately. Lou Gehrig also knew he didn't have long to live.



On July 4th Lou Gehrig stood before the crowd at Yankee Stadium and said these words: *“For the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”* Even in the midst of disappointment, and the prospect of death, he wasn't bitter. He spoke words of gratitude. His speech has been known as the greatest speech in sports ever. 2 years later, he died from ALS, which has come to be known as Lou Gehrig's Disease.

These days, we expect most people in big-money sports, to have HUGE egos – to have an attitude of entitlement rather than gratitude. We see millionaire athletes hold out against billionaire owners, because their yearly salary of \$20 million is just not enough for them to scrape by on.

Lou Gehrig said he considered himself, “the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” It takes a lot of character to express that much gratitude in that moment. But the truly blessed ones – are the ones who play the game with gratitude.



Life is a lot like a game of Monopoly. In the game of Monopoly, if you own it all, you win! And in the game of life, we often play to win – which usually means money, status, awards, pleasure, good looks, powerful friends.

But the most important lesson of the game of Monopoly is this: after the game is over, it all goes back in the box.

All those houses and hotels. All that property, the railroads and the utility companies. All those thousands of dollars. *When the game is over, it all goes back in the box.*



In this game called Life, none of what we accumulate will last. We can't take any of it with us. So, the great secret, and **the goal of life**, is not to accumulate stuff – **not to be rich in POSSESSIONS, but to be RICH TOWARD GOD.**

Jesus said, being rich toward God is not real hard. It's all about loving God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and loving others as you love yourself.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Matthew 22:37-39 ~ Jesus

And the good news is; being rich toward God is available to everyone. It doesn't matter if you have a LOT, or a little stuff. It doesn't matter where you live, your age, your education,

occupation, or race. Being rich toward God is available to you today. Being rich toward God is to have riches that are found only in a personal relationship with God. These riches are: forgiveness for all wrongs in the past; PEACE in your heart and mind; HOPE; knowing that God is *FOR* you. God gives the riches of purpose and meaning in this life, real LOVE for other people, enjoying the beauty God has created around you, and if that weren't enough – heaven to come.

The great JOY of life is not found in stuff – not found in possessions, or thrills, or fame. The happiness those things give doesn't last, and leaves you more empty and more hollow than before.

The great JOY of life is found in gratitude. Gratitude is how people who are rich toward God play the game.

In the 1965 movie, *Shenandoah*, Jimmy Stewart plays a widowed father of a large family during the Civil War. He is a cranky man, and he believes he has worked hard to get everything he has.



Before his wife died, she made him promise to pray before each meal. In this scene, his large family gathers at the table, and he prays before the meal.

But these are the words of his prayer:

Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvest it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat, Amen.

It's a pretty testy prayer! There's no hint of gratitude in his words.

He's missed the whole point of praying. If that's the way he says 'grace', you would hate to hear him complain.

What happens in the movie is the Civil War comes. He loses everything. His family is ripped apart. Brothers fight against brothers. His daughter gives birth to a granddaughter named Martha after his deceased wife, but his daughter dies in childbirth. One of his sons is killed before his eyes by a frightened young sentry. His youngest son, who he loved because the boy reminded him so much of his wife – the son is carried off as a prisoner of war, and is gone for many years.

Deep into the war, the few family members left gather around the table for a meal. Jimmy starts to pray the old prayer: "Lord, we cleared the land, we plowed it ...," but he chokes up. He can't go on. It's the suffering and the loss, the birth and the death, that have shattered his illusions of his self-sufficiency. The lesson of the movie is kind of surprising. You see, it's the loss and pain – not having everything go his way – but the loss and the pain that opened his heart toward gratitude.



At the end of the story, he's lost almost everything, he has lost all hope of handling things on his own. He hears the church bells ringing and his family is surprised that he wants to go to worship. He is sitting in church, when his youngest son, comes home to him. And he erupts in thanksgiving to God.

His gratitude grew. He comes to realize that he has seen things all wrong. The reality is that his body is a gift; his children are gifts; the seeds to plant crops, the earth and rain and sun – and growth – are all gifts; his work is a gift. Life itself is a gift.

It's surprising that sometimes we don't realize how much we have to be grateful for until it's threatened or taken away.

Gratitude is the Ability to Experience Life as a Gift

I sense that right now during this pandemic, we and the people of our nation, have lost our ideas of entitlement. People aren't as much demanding what they think they deserve, because we've seen how easily it can all slip away. Instead, we have discovered more now than in a long, long time, that each day is a gift, undeserved, unearned. Each day is a gift to be grateful for.

This weekend is Memorial Day weekend. Memorial Day is all about gratitude. It's a day to remember the sacrifices men and women of the Armed Forces have made to keep us free people. Some of them gave their very lives so that we receive these blessings.

The other week my wife and I were talking about how this pandemic has led to a new definition of the word "Hero." It used to be that we would call soldiers heroes who gave their lives for their country. And people who rescue someone from flood waters or from a burning building – we'd call them heroes too. Now, doctors, nurses, medical technicians, Emergency first responders, and, grocery store front line workers – all are heroes. And that's good because they have put their lives at risk for the welfare of their fellow citizens. My point is simply that we have such a huge reason to be grateful!

Gratitude is a gift from God that opens us up to wonder, and delight, and humility. It makes our hearts generous. It liberates us from the prison of self-preoccupation.

Gratitude is an act of humility.



When the Masai tribe of West Africa express thanks, they put their foreheads on the ground and say, **"My head is in the dirt."** Gratitude is always an act of humility.

Anything we get from God is a pure gift. We don't *DESERVE* anything. We don't deserve anything GOOD from a GOOD God, because WE'RE NOT GOOD!

God says in the Bible:

“None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” Romans 3:10b-12

That’s saying that our selfishness and sin and ingratitude have put us as “outsiders” who deserved nothing good from Jesus.

We like to THINK that we are deserving of God’s love and His gifts. We like to THINK of ourselves as good. So, let me ask a few questions:

- Have you ever lied? Even a harmless little white lie? Then what does that make you? A liar.
- Have you ever stole anything? Even a paper clip from the office? Then you’re a thief.
- When you were in school did you ever – even just once -- look on somebody else’s paper and write their answer on your own? Ever fudge the numbers on tax return – even just a bit? Then you’re a cheat.
- Ever break the speed limit when driving? Then you’re a law-breaker.

Even if you didn’t DO those things, but you WANTED to in your heart, then you aren’t good enough to deserve any gift from God. And that covers all of us, doesn’t it?!

But the amazing gift from God is that – even when we deserve nothing from Him, still, out of His amazing love – He gives you His best.

The Bible says that is **“while we were still sinners that Christ died for us.”** Romans 5:8

Completely undeserved, completely a gift, completely by His sheer love, God sent Jesus. He gave his best. God not only gives you food and clothes, houses and family, -- but even more than that – He gives heaven, hope, forgiveness – all because of what Jesus did for you.

He lived the perfect life you don't live and can't live. He gives His perfect life to count as *yours* – so you ARE deserving in God's record book. And all your wrongs and sins, all the junk in your life and junk in your heart, Jesus died on the cross to pay for it all.

Forgiveness, hope, heaven – life itself, and everything that's good – they're all gifts ... from God to you.

And all it takes is the humility on your part to receive God's gifts as gifts, instead of insist that you don't need them. All it takes is trust Jesus when He gives all you need, instead of trust you. That's what faith is all about. It's the humility to trust God for every good gift. God offers them because of what Jesus, in love, has already completely done for you. Even faith is a gift from God that He creates in your heart.

So will YOU live each day filled with gratitude?
Will you **Play the game with gratitude** ?

Develop a low threshold of gratitude.

Some researchers have concluded that grateful people have what they call a low threshold of gratitude. That is, just as a whisper has to reach a certain decibel of loudness before we hear it, goodness and blessing in our lives has to reach a certain level before we notice it and are grateful to God. Just as some of us are hard of hearing, some of us are 'hard of thanking.' It takes a HUGE gift – like winning the lottery or a new car – before we are grateful. But other people have a low threshold of gratitude. They find that a sunset, or smile from a friend can set off a sense that they have been blessed by a gift they did not earn. Develop a low threshold of gratitude.

Build gratitude by keeping track.

Become a more grateful person by keeping track. Gratitude can be learned.

Researchers Robert Emmons and Mike McCullough randomly assigned people to keep a daily diary for 2 weeks. One

group was to keep track of things that happened that they were grateful for. A 2nd group was to keep track of hassles that came their way. A 3rd group was simply to keep track of life events. The group that was to keep track of things they were grateful for experienced joy, happiness, and life satisfaction all rocketing up.

How they did it was real simple – something any of us can do. Keep a pen and a journal or piece of paper by your bed. At night, before you got to sleep, take a few minutes to reflect on 5 events during the day that you're grateful for. It could be as simple as waking up in the morning, seeing the face of someone you care for, eating a great taco, completing a challenging assignment at work, or hearing words of appreciation from a friend.

As you write down these events, remember that each of them came to you from the hand of God. Use them to reflect on how good God must be to give you such good gifts. Recognize that each gift comes to you as a way God is showing His love to you. Then, whisper to Him how grateful you are for His gifts.

As you observe Memorial Day, may you be grateful for all those who have given their lives in service for their fellow citizens. And may everyday of your life be filled with Gratitude toward God. People who are truly rich – rich toward God – play the game with gratitude. May you be one of those people. Amen.