

On Thankfulness, and the Joy of Giving Thanks

One thing a man doesn't need when he's down is more condemnation.

A former pastor, a good friend of mine, had made some horrible mistakes last year. He got involved with a woman in his congregation. The church officials, without a blink, fired him—even though he had voluntarily broken off the adulterous relationship before confessing to his elders. Now he's struggling, not only because he's been denied the high honor of preaching, but because he's having to work at a secular job in the same town where he was disgraced. He told me how much it meant, when everyone else was running him down, to have one person call and say, "Thanks for what you meant to me and my family when we were going through a tough time."

My father died at the age of 87. On his 81st birthday I drove down the Florida coast to his home to spend part of the day with him.

"If you had to list the 10 most significant things that have happened to you during your 80th year, what would they be?" I asked.

He smiled and said, "I'd have to think about the last nine. But I can show you number one."

He got up from his chair at his desk and walked over to his filing cabinet. Sorting through the top drawer, he pulled out a letter and returned to his desk. It was from the chairman of the department of English literature in a large Midwestern university.

He read it to me as if he were reading from the Bible.

"Sixty years ago," the professor said, "I sat in your high school English class at Delph, Indiana. Rudyard Kipling, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—they all came alive to me through your teaching. I went on to get my doctorate and eventually became chairman of the department of English literature at this university. Now I am retiring. I've thought of you many times but have never written. Today I write to say 'thank you.'"

My daddy lowered the letter. Tears glistened in his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

"This," he said, smiling through his tears, "is the finest thing to happen to me this last year."

Thankful people smile. Self-righteous people sneer. Selfish people scowl. Recently, while walking through the supermarket, I passed a man wheeling a big cart of groceries. He looked at me and smiled. Even though I was scowling at the time (I always scowl in grocery stores), I found myself smiling back. Suddenly I felt good—and I smiled at the next person who passed. She, startled, smiled back. If we keep this up, I thought, the whole store will be smiling.

That's the way it is with saying, "thank you." It's not enough to feel it. You need to express it. With a letter, a phone call or in person.

And in the process, you become a little more like Jesus.

Jamie Buckingham wrote 153 "Last Word" columns for Charisma magazine from 1979 to 1992. His singular voice was animated by a heart for Jesus and his baptism in the power of the Holy Spirit in 1967 at a Full Gospel Businessmen's convention. Buckingham was the steadying force during the television ministry scandals of the 1980s, penning the seminal article on the PTL scandal, "God Is Shaking His Church" in May 1986. "Charisma Classics" are from his 1993 Creation House book, Look Out World, I'm Me.