



The Publican and the Pharisee by James Tissot

There was once a boy named Sam, who lived in a big white house on the wide main street in his home town. Sam was an only child. His parents had waited a long time for Sam to be born, and when he finally came to be part of their family, they made Sam the very center of their lives. When Sam's dad came home from the office where he worked, he often brought with him some brightly wrapped gift sitting in the backseat of his car just for Sam. This happened so often and for so long that Sam just got used to the idea that most days he would get a new present. In fact, Sam got to the point that he figured it was just expected that his mom and dad give him a computer game or a model airplane or new toy every day. And something else happened too. Sam got so used to receiving a present from his parents every single day that he just forgot to say "Thank you." Pretty soon, he couldn't even remember the words, "Thank you."

The Fall Sam turned 6, it was time for him to go to school. So, Sam's parents dropped him off at his teacher's classroom that 1st day. They kissed him on both cheeks and turned around and left. There weren't nearly as many things to play with in the schoolroom as Sam was used to at home. In fact, Sam's teacher had more books than anything else for the children. Sam wasn't too crazy about books. During recess, Sam would go around the classroom collecting as many toys as he could find. Sometimes he even took toys away from his classmates. Sam never thanked

any of the other children when they gave him one of the toys they were playing with. Remember, Sam had forgotten how to say "Thank you."

At first, the children in Sam's class all played together in one big group, but after a few mornings, more and more of the students started to exclude Sam from their games. They didn't like the fact that he always wanted to play with all the toys in the class during recess. When one of the students would give up one of the toys he or she was playing with -- when anyone gave anything to Sam -- he never even bothered to say "thank you." Pretty soon, Sam was left to play all alone.

Except for a little girl named Rita. Rita was really tiny. She had dark eyes, curly brown hair and just the right number of freckles. The strange thing was that, while after a couple of weeks no one in the classroom wanted to play with Sam during recess since he was behaving so selfishly, Rita always seemed to be happy to play with him, even when all the other students had deserted them.

Although Rita was rather quiet and didn't say much, she was always smiling. And she always did something else, too. Whenever Sam got tired of playing with a particular toy, a model car, an airplane or a model train, whenever Sam put one toy down to go on and play with something else, Rita would pick up the toy that Sam had discarded and say, "Thanks, Sam!"

After a couple of weeks during which Sam and Rita were left alone together, Sam looked up at Rita one morning and said in a gruff little voice, "Rita, why are you always saying, 'Thanks, Sam!' I haven't given you anything." But Rita said, "Oh yes you have." And then Rita explained, "You see, I spend just about all my time by myself. My mom and I live in a small house way out in the country. She brings me to the bus stop early in the morning on her way to her job, and then when I get off the bus, she picks me up and takes me straight home. She's trying to get a better job, so she studies at night, and that means she doesn't have a lot of time to play with me. We live so far out in the country that there aren't any kids who live nearby. So, I spend most of my time playing by myself."

But here at school, I don't have to play alone because I get to play with you. You see, you **have** given me something, Sam, something really special. You've given me your friendship. So, thank you, Sam!" said Rita...Sam thought about that for a minute, and then he said something he hadn't said in a long time, maybe even never. Sam looked at his friend and he said, "You're welcome!" And you know, when Sam said that, when he said "You're welcome," it felt really good. And Sam couldn't help smiling just a little.

The next morning when recess time arrived, Sam went over to where one of the other students was playing and said, "Are you through with that," pointing to a shiny red, model racing car. Sam's classmate glanced up at him and said, "You can have it." Before Sam knew it, before he could close up his mouth it slipped out. Sam said, "thank-you." When Sam said that, why, his classmate looked up at Sam in surprise, and said, "Sure. No problem, you're welcome." Then, pretty soon both the boys were smiling.

Do you know what happened next? Why, in the next few days, just about everybody in the classroom started saying things like "Thank you!" and "You're welcome!" People were smiling at each other and laughing and playing together. Things in the classroom were really very different, just because one little girl kept on saying, "Thank you."

One afternoon later that week, Sam got off the school bus and walked into the big white house along the wide main street where he lived with his parents. He went into the kitchen where his mother was beginning dinner. Sam, who always got to have a cookie before he started his homework, but just one because anything more would have spoiled his dinner, although Sam didn't see it that way because at dinner he always had to eat squash or broccoli or other yukky stuff – but anyway, Sam got a big, chocolate chip, peanut butter cookie from the cookie jar that sat near the sink on the kitchen counter. Before he took his first bite of that cookie, Sam turned to where his mother was peeling carrots for dinner and said, "Hey, Mom. I just wanted to say thanks for these cookies. I know you spent a lot of time baking them; they're really good, a lot better than the ones from the supermarket. So, really, thanks a lot."

And do you know, Sam's mother smiled this big, bright smile as she laughed and reached up and ruffled Sam's hair. That night, Sam and his mom and dad had a really good time at dinner talking and laughing about what had happened in school that day, and Sam couldn't help thinking that things in his family were really good that night, maybe just because one little child had taken the time to say, "Thank you."

...When my wife and I were travelling in Greece some years ago, certain words became vital currency for our daily excursions into the delightful small towns of low-slung, pastel-colored buildings, sprinkled like pink and white rock-candy across the hilly Greek countryside. Early on, we learned the power of the word **evcharisto**. It is the Greek word for "thank you." Some readers will recognize in this word a similarity with the name for the worship rite of The Lord's Supper, which is known in many Christian denominations as "The Eucharist." This similitude is no accident. The Lord's Supper described earliest by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34) is associated by many theologians with a worship service of thanksgiving. Hence the name linking our Sunday morning worship rite to the early Greek concept of giving thanks.

In his book *For the Life of the World*, the great Greek Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann takes the position that the "real fall of man is his non-Eucharistic life in a non-Eucharistic world."¹ In other words, the fallen nature of man is characterized more than anything else by his having lost both the ability and the need to give thanks to God.

There is an element of true humility at the heart of every sincere expression of thanks. If you are truly thankful for something -- a present for example -- and your thanks are sincere, then there is always an element of your realizing that you didn't really do anything to merit the pretty little box wrapped up in cheerful paper. You recognize that the gift or gesture is simply an expression of genuine affection or admiration from someone in your life, an unmerited blessing as it were.

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973) 18.

Confronted with this undeserved bit of love, you express your appreciation through a sincere word of thanksgiving, and there is really quite a significant kernel of humility involved in that kind of reaction.

There is great power in it, too. A while back, a Japanese guest in our house brought some lovely gifts with her to express her appreciation for the time she was spending with us. As we were sitting on our front porch one evening during her stay, enjoying the sibilant whispering night of summer in the Blue Ridge Mountains, she mentioned how gracious she thought my family had been to her. I was surprised by this and told her so, since she was actually the gracious person who had brought the lovely gifts. She replied, "In my culture there is the word for harmony in a house, which you might pronounce as *wa*. In establishing this kind of harmony, the attitude of how a person receives a gift is just as important as the giving of the gift itself."

Of course, you also run into a completely insincere thank you from time to time. The most blatant example in Scripture of insincere thanks is probably the Pharisee in Luke 18 who thanked God that he was not like "those other men." But it was the truly repentant publican, the humble man who went away justified. Indeed, perhaps much of the fallen nature of our world is due to how we have twisted and impoverished what should be a vital moment of humble, heartfelt gratitude for acts of genuine love. These moments when love is victorious can be powerfully celebrated by a simple, sincere expression of thanks.

We heard the account of Jesus walking on water. And he has just fed the thousands by the lake-side with 5 loaves and 2 fish.

But it wasn't enough. In fact, in Mark's account, we hear that the hearts of Jesus' closest friends were still too hardened to appreciate exactly what God was doing for them. No, it would take something else, something grander, something much more glorious to move the hearts of the people, to really break them open and render them ready to receive the love that God longed to pour in. It would take nothing less than the agony of that bloody hillside one Friday afternoon, and the inexplicable wonder of the empty tomb that following Sunday morning. You see, for the likes of wretched sinners like you and me, to truly make us come to the Lord, to move us down there to our knees, to finally lead us to utter our heart-felt thanks, for you and me, nothing else but the Cross would do. So, thanks be to God. Praise be to Jesus. Amen. JWB+ 7-24-18