

The Cost of Gratefulness
By Randall Jones

I was about 13. My father frequently took me on short outing on Saturdays. Sometimes we went to a park, or to a marina to look at boats. My favorites were trips to junk stores, where we could admire old electronic stuff. Once in a while we would buy something for 50 cents just to take it apart.

On the way home from these trips, Dad frequently stopped at the Dairy Queen for 10-cent ice cream cones. Not every single time; just often enough. I couldn't expect it, but I could hope and pray from the time we started heading home to that critical corner where we would either go straight for the ice cream or turn and go home empty-handed. That corner meant either mouth-watering excitement or disappointment.

A few times my father teased me by going home the long way. "I'm just going this way for variety," he would say, as we drove by the Dairy Queen without stopping. It was a game, and I was well fed, so we're not talking torture here.

On the best days he would ask, in a tone that made it sound novel and spontaneous, "Would you like an ice cream cone?" and I would say, "That sounds great, Dad!" I'd always have chocolate and he'd have vanilla. He would hand me 20 cents and I would run in to buy the usual. We'd eat them in the car. I loved my dad and I loved ice cream—so that was heaven.

On one fateful day, we were heading home, and I was hoping and praying for the beautiful sound of his offer. It came. "Would you like an ice cream cone today?"

"That sounds great, Dad!"

But then he said, "It sounds good to me too, Son. How would you like to treat today?" Twenty cents! Twenty cents! My mind reeled. I could afford it. I got 25 cents a week allowance, plus some extra for odd jobs. But saving money was important. Dad told me that. And when it was my money, ice cream just wasn't a good use of it.

Why didn't it occur to me that this was a golden opportunity to give something back to my very generous father? Why didn't I think that he had bought me 50 ice cream cones, and I had never bought him one? But all could think was "20 cents!"

In a fit of selfish, miserly ingratitude, I said the awful words that have rung in my ears ever since. "Well, in that case, I guess I'll pass."

My father just said, "Okay, Son."

But as we turned to head home, I realized how wrong I was and begged him to turn back. "I'll pay," I pleaded.

But he just said, "That's okay, we don't really need one," and wouldn't hear my pleading. We drove home.

I felt awful for my selfishness and ungratefulness. He didn't rub it in, or even act disappointed. But I don't think he could have done anything to make a deeper impression on me.

I learned that generosity goes two ways and gratefulness sometimes costs a little more than "thank you." On that day gratefulness would have cost 20 cents, and it would have been the best ice cream I'd ever had.

I'll tell you one more thing. We went on another trip the next week, and as we approached the crucial corner, I said, "Dad, would you like an ice cream cone today? My treat."