

The Ungrateful Russian Wretch

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Неблагодарность: ingratitude

Every year at the end of November — specifically the fourth Thursday (Thanksgiving Day in the U.S.) — I think about благодарность (gratitude) and ways to express it in Russian. This year I decided to break tradition and write about неблагодарность (ingratitude), expecting to find lots of Russian synonyms. But to my surprise, it's slim pickings.

But then I thought: Why am I surprised? After all, there might be many ways to say “thank you,” from the ubiquitous спасибо (thanks) to the formal благодарю (I thank you), but there is really only one way not to thank someone: silence.

Kind of a linguistic dead end.

And then I began to comb through my library of books about Russian language and culture, looking for gratitude or the lack of it. Most of my books have chapters on key concepts, like честь и совесть (honor and conscience), or opposites, like правда-неправда (truth and falsehood). But nowhere did I find благодарность-неблагодарность. In the pantheon of great virtues благодарность is not mentioned, nor is неблагодарность down in the dungeon vices and sins.

Now, don't get me wrong. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't say спасибо every time someone gives you something or helps you. And every parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle and older sibling in Russia pounds спасибо into the tender heads of babies and toddlers. Not expressing thanks is more than a faux pas — it's a sign of bad upbringing and an unpleasant personality.

And in much of Russia, people believe gratitude is good for your soul. When disaster comes near but slips by, like a Kamaz that hits the brakes just before crushing your Smart Car, your friends say: Иди в церковь и благодари Бога (Go to church and thank God). Or when you realize that the girlfriend you've been pining over is a harridan, they'll say: Бог отвёл. Иди свечку поставь. (God averted a disaster. Go light a candle.)

But still: when you look at Russian sayings and proverbs, you can see that over the last couple

of millennia the folks in this part of the world have regarded saying “thank you” and being kind and grateful as excellent behaviors... that might not mean that much.

So they say: За добро добром и платят (Kindness is repaid in kindness.) Or: Сделав другу добро, себе жди того же (When you do good, expect the same in return.) And they have sayings about being grateful, no matter what: Своего спасибо не жалеи, а чужого не жди (Don't skimp with your thanks, but don't expect thanks back.)

But that's the thing — you might not get any kindness in return: За добро не жди добра (Don't expect kindness for kindness.)

And there is yet another saying: Скажешь спасибо, так ладно, а нет - и так хорошо (Say thank you, and that's fine, but if you don't — that's all right, too.)

Maybe it's because thanks don't pay the rent: спасибо в карман не положишь (You can't put “thanks” in your pocket); из спасибо шубы не сошьёшь (you can't sew a fur coat out of thanks); and спасибо на хлеб не намажешь (you can't butter your bread with thanks).

But, all the same, a person wants to be thanked. The word for that relative who never helps at big family gatherings and never thanks anyone is неблагодарная (ungrateful), and it's not what you want to be called. Неблагодарный is often applied to teenagers and young people, who are never grateful enough: Для тебя родители столько сделали, а ты, неблагодарная, плюёшь на всё, и ещё университет бросила! (Your parents have done so much for you, and you little ingrate — you don't care about anything! You even dropped out of university!)

If someone doesn't show due appreciation, you can cut them down with: С твоей стороны просто неблагодарно! (It's simply ungrateful on your part!)

But you know — you might just have to live with ingratitude.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of “The Russian Word's Worth,” a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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