

A Tactical Belief Book



R. Herbert

LIVING THANKS

A Guide to Growing and Showing Gratitude

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INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR GRATITUDE

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all ... giving thanks ...” (Colossians 3:17).

These words of the apostle Paul are familiar to most Christians, yet although we may know them well and even occasionally focus on them, we could all probably become more thankful and express gratitude even more fully in our lives. Many of us may feel appreciative and express thankfulness when we receive new blessings – especially if they are “major” ones – but gratitude at that level can miss much of what Paul was really talking about and what God intends in our lives.

Notice that Paul does not say “Give thanks when you receive something” but “give thanks *whatever you do*.” In other words, he tells us that gratitude should be a part of every aspect of our lives – that we should make thankfulness a part of living, breathing, eating, talking: a part of whatever we do and who we are.

That is what this book is about. If you have not given serious focused thought to the concept of thankfulness, this book aims to help you see ways in which you can more deeply experience and express gratitude. This involves developing gratitude toward others and primarily, of course, gratitude to God; but to accomplish these things we must first recognize the lack of thankfulness that so often characterizes human nature.

Turning Ingratitude Around

It is sometimes said that ingratitude is both the least recognized yet the most common sin – and there may be a great deal of truth in that observation. Over 150 years ago President Abraham Lincoln

summarized the situation regarding the people of the United States when he stated:

We have been the recipients of the choicest blessings of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation ever has grown; but we have forgotten God! We have forgotten the gracious Hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Certainly, ingratitude has filled human history, and it is frequently decried throughout the word of God. We have only to look at the well-known story of how Christ healed ten lepers and only one of the ten returned to thank him (Luke 17:11-19). We may read that story and think that Jesus was surprised by this lack of gratitude, but it is more likely that he was teaching a lesson by pointing out the fact that only one in ten individuals who were helped – even to this miraculous degree – expressed gratitude for what they received.

This understanding is clear in the writings of the apostle Paul. Looking back in time, Paul wrote of humans: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God *nor gave thanks to him ...*” (Romans 1:21, emphasis added), and looking forward in time the apostle predicted it would only get worse. Writing to his co-worker Timothy, Paul stressed that a time would come when: “People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, *ungrateful...*” (2 Timothy 3:2, emphasis added).

We have only to look around us to see that we live in such an age as Paul described, but while we may not be able to change the world around us, we can individually come to better see the importance of gratitude and to more fully make it part of ourselves.

Learning to Live Thankfully

Gratitude has been defined as “a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible” (Harvard Medical School Health Newsletter). While the Bible helps us to understand that God gives all of us the capacity for such gratitude, modern psychology helps us to see that appreciation is nevertheless not innate – it a learned behavior. Gratitude is something we must develop just as we must learn to walk, talk, swim, drive, or to do many other things. We learn thankfulness through the example of others, by instruction, and by focusing on what it means that we have received something.

But true gratitude is more than only experiencing and expressing thankfulness occasionally, when we are particularly struck by some blessing. We must learn to make appreciation an ongoing and constant way of thought by developing what we might call a “gratitude reflex.” This involves both motivation and practice on our part.

For motivation we must come to see the many reasons why gratitude is a good idea for us and for others – which is why this book looks first at some of the physical benefits that gratitude creates in our lives. This is not to say that we need to have some kind of “payback” for developing thankfulness, but that by more fully understanding how gratitude works, we can better see that there are good reasons to prioritize it in our lives and those of our children.

Next, we look at some of the spiritual reasons why we should develop a thankful attitude and we examine some of those reasons closely before looking at specific ways we can increase gratitude in our lives – in order to honor the One who has given us everything and who calls us to a life of living thanks.

1. GRATITUDE IS GOOD FOR YOU

“When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.” – Willie Nelson

Why is an “attitude of gratitude” so important? There are actually a great many reasons, but in this chapter we will consider some of the physical ones that can directly affect our lives.

At the most basic level, gratitude is good for us. Psychologists, medical doctors, and other researchers have found evidence strongly suggesting that individuals who exhibit gratitude in their lives tend to be happier, to enjoy better health, and to live longer than those who do not. These are obviously all good reasons to make gratitude a part of our lives, so consider the evidence we have.

The Physical Benefits of Gratitude

It seems to be clear that individuals who experience and exhibit gratitude in their lives enjoy many significant physical health benefits. A number of studies have shown that a person’s level of gratitude can predict sleep quality and duration – the more we are thankful, the better we sleep (where there are no other underlying issues affecting our sleep patterns). For example, according to a 2011 study published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, individuals who spent a few minutes before going to bed writing down things they were grateful for that day slept better and longer. For most of us, better sleep affects almost all aspects of our physical lives.

Perhaps partly as a result of its effect on sleep and rest, gratitude has been shown to improve performance and productivity for many people. One study found that high school students who exhibited thankfulness had higher grades, better social integration, and more satisfaction with life than less grateful students. A 2014 study published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* established

that gratitude increased the self-esteem of athletes and was thus linked to optimal performance. Gratitude can also help us in the workplace. Numerous studies have shown that employees who are grateful for their jobs often feel motivated to work harder and produce more than people who do not feel such gratitude. As a result, grateful workers often succeed in their careers more than if they had not been thankful!

Gratitude certainly can have a positive effect on overall physical health. According to a 2012 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences*, thankful people experience fewer aches and pains and report feeling healthier than other people. Perhaps as a result of this fact, grateful people often exercise more frequently and are more likely to attend regular medical check-ups – both factors which contribute to living longer. As one writer put it, if gratitude were a pill, doctors would prescribe it!

At least one study has shown that thankful people are likely to interact with others in a more positive manner – even when others do not behave kindly toward them. A 2012 study conducted at the University of Kentucky found that study participants who scored higher on a scale of gratitude exhibited more sensitivity and empathy toward other people and were less likely to retaliate when they felt wronged by them.

These benefits clearly affect our relationships with others in major ways. One research study showed that individuals who took the time to express thankfulness for their partner felt more positive toward them and happier in their relationship. Thankful individuals were also found to be more comfortable than less thankful people about discussing problems in their relationships, and gratitude was found to be one of the most important factors contributing to long-term marriage stability and happiness.

Psychological Benefits of Gratitude

While some of the physical benefits of thankfulness that we have looked at also affect our psychological health, there are many other

advantages of gratitude that positively affect our mental state and well-being.

Research done over many years has shown that gratitude not only reduces stress but also enhances mental resilience and our ability to recover from trauma. Among the more interesting findings of studies in this area, a 2006 study published in the journal *Behavior Research and Therapy* found that combat veterans with higher levels of thankfulness experienced lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. In a 2003 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, gratitude was also found to be a major contributing factor to psychological resilience for those who suffered personally or lost loved ones in the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

At a more everyday level, gratitude helps us in dealing with the ongoing small problems that arise in life and can significantly reduce feelings of anxiety. Importantly, gratitude has been found to reduce many negative emotions – ranging from envy and unhealthy competition to feelings of frustration and depression. In short, gratitude often brings us peace of mind.

Gratitude even has a bearing on our sense of morality and ultimately on the kind of person we become. As author and broadcaster Dennis Prager has written:

In many ways, gratitude is the most important of all the good character traits. It is the most indispensable trait to both happiness and goodness. One can neither be a happy person nor a good person without gratitude. The less gratitude one has, the more one sees oneself as a victim; and nothing is more likely to produce a bad person or a bad group than defining oneself or one's group as a victim. Victims, having been hurt, too often believe they have a license to hurt others. As for happiness, if you think of all the people you know, you will not be able to name one who is ungrateful and happy. The two are mutually exclusive. (From *The Rational Bible* by Dennis Prager, Washington, DC, 2018).

Happiness is indeed a major by-product of gratitude. There is a lot of truth in the old saying that “Happy people are not always grateful, but grateful people are almost always happy!” If this seems exaggerated, we should realize that this is a fact confirmed by research. A small article titled *Giving thanks can make you happier*, published on the Harvard Medical School website, stresses that in extensive psychology research gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness.

Of course, if true thankfulness is already a part of our lives, we do not need any of the physical or psychological “perks” or benefits that gratitude brings in order to motivate us to be grateful. But knowing these facts can help us to be thankful for the God-given capacity of gratitude itself. It is also faith-strengthening to know that there are positive physical reasons for following the way of life to which God has called us – and God does call us to a life of gratitude, as we will see in the next chapter.

2. GRATITUDE IS GOD'S WILL

“The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me...”
(Psalms 50:23 ESV).

Beyond – and, of course, above – all the many physical reasons gratitude is good for us, the word of God makes it clear that gratitude is God’s will for our lives. Many scriptures show that thankfulness is not only encouraged in the Bible, but also commanded.

We will look at some of the reasons for this truth later in this chapter. But first we can briefly look at the clear evidence that an attitude of thankfulness is a spiritual necessity. Gratitude is something the biblical writers continually encourage, directly or indirectly, and we see this in the Old and New Testaments alike.

Gratitude in the Old Testament

Looking first at the Old Testament, we have only to read the book of Psalms to see many instances of instruction to express gratitude. Psalm 136, for example, begins with the exclamation “Give thanks to the Lord” and the command is repeated numerous times throughout the psalm which also ends with thanksgiving.

But long before the time of David and the psalms, ancient Israel was guided and encouraged to be thankful. We are told that Moses “... appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, to extol, thank, and praise the Lord, the God of Israel” (1 Chronicles 16:4), and certain individuals were given the full-time task of expressing the nation’s gratitude: “ ... Heman and Jeduthun and the rest of those chosen and designated by name to give thanks to the Lord ...” (1 Chronicles 16:41). We see the same situation later in Israel’s history: “The Levites were ... in charge of the songs of thanksgiving” (Nehemiah 12:8).

This “official” giving of thanks was enhanced by the fact that individual Israelites were also encouraged to express gratitude by making an offering to God called a “thank offering” (Leviticus 7:12-15, etc.). Although the people were given flexibility in making their thank offerings, it is clear that such offerings were to be made, and made properly, as the following command shows: “When you sacrifice a thank offering to the Lord, sacrifice it in such a way that it will be accepted on your behalf” (Leviticus 22:29).

Unfortunately, despite their acts of ritual reminding them to express gratitude, the people of ancient Israel were not always – or even often – truly thankful to God, and we read many examples of the people falling short in this regard (Exodus 16:3, etc.). God repeatedly chastised Israel for this failing through his prophets and reminded the people of what he had done for them that so often went unacknowledged and unappreciated (Isaiah 1:2, etc.).

Gratitude in the New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament, we find that it was certainly the custom of Jesus to give thanks. We see examples of this not only in his giving thanks for food (Matthew 14:19, 15:36, 26:26-27, etc.), but also in the thanks often included in his other prayers. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, we find one such prayer consisting almost entirely of expressed thankfulness:

In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will’ (Luke 10:21 ESV).

Another clear example of Jesus making a prayer of thanks is found in the Gospel of John which records his words after the raising of Lazarus:

... Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me’ (John 11:41-42).

It is true that the so-called “Lord’s Prayer” – the model prayer outline given by Jesus to his disciples (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4) – does not contain specific words of thanks; but the context in which this guide to prayer was given doubtless explains any apparent lack of giving thanks.

When we look closely, we see that in Matthew’s narrative the prayer is introduced with the words “... your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). In Luke’s narrative the context is also specifically one of things for which we should ask. In that Gospel, Jesus is said to have followed his prayer outline with the words: “...Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread...’” (Luke 11:5-8), and he summarizes his point by saying that we should “... Ask and it will be given to you ...For everyone who asks receives ...” (Luke 11:9-10).

Given this context we can see that the stress of the Lord’s Prayer is not to cover every aspect of prayer, but simply to enumerate the important things for which we need to ask. So we can presume that knowing Jesus’ own example, the disciples would have understood that every request in the outline their Master gave them would be made with thanks – both for help already given in that area and in faithful expectation of God’s continued help.

This attitude is especially clear in the writings of the apostle Paul who tells us that we should: “... not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with *thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6 ESV, emphasis added). Paul clearly saw the need to offer thanksgiving along with our requests – a principle he reinforced in saying that our attitude of prayer should be one of: “giving thanks always and for everything

to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20 ESV).

Deeply felt gratitude was something Jesus and his apostles frequently expressed – leaving us an example that we should follow also.

The Spirit of Gratitude

But why is it so important, spiritually, that we give thanks? First and foremost, when we express gratitude to God, we humbly acknowledge him as the maker and giver of every good thing. As the apostle James wrote: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights ...” (James 1:17).

When we feel and express thanksgiving with that understanding, our focus moves away from ourselves and our own circumstances toward God. In this sense, giving thanks is a central part of prayer itself in that it reorients us, humbles us, and helps us to see God in proper perspective as the Maker and Giver of everything we have. For all these reasons, our giving thanks honors God as he should be honored (Psalm 50:23).

And although we may not always think of it this way, thanksgiving is truly a part of praise: when we thank God, we praise him as we should. We can find dozens of scriptures throughout the Bible showing this connection between gratitude and praise. Notice these few examples from different books of the Old Testament:

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name (Psalm 100:4).

Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious
name (1 Chronicles 29:13).

The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise
and thanks to the Lord (2 Chronicles 5:13).

With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord (Ezra 3:11).

For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God (Nehemiah 12:46).

This direct connection between gratitude and praise is not surprising because the Hebrew word *todah* “thanksgiving” is actually derived from the word *yadah* “to praise.”

Why God Encourages Gratitude

So, a true attitude of gratitude helps us to see God as he is, to acknowledge our need for him, to accept his will in our lives, and even to worship him properly. In fact, the writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews says, “... let us *be thankful, and so worship God acceptably* with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28, emphasis added). Perhaps no other verse in the Bible better summarizes the truth that gratitude helps us worship God as we should. As the book of Psalms tells us in the verse with which this chapter begins: “The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me ...” (Psalms 50:23 ESV).

Ultimately, however, the greatest reason for thankfulness is that gratitude makes us more like God. If you never thought about God being appreciative, read what the author of the book of Hebrews tells us: “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them” (Hebrews 6:10). Although it does not use the word “gratitude,” this verse clearly shows that our heavenly Father would consider it unjust to not be appreciative of those who serve him, and that he will express gratitude by rewarding them.

3. GRATITUDE CAN BE DEVELOPED

“Gratitude is the gift God gives us that enables us to be blessed by all his other gifts, the way our taste buds enable us to enjoy the gift of food.” – John Ortberg

Once we realize that there are very powerful physical and spiritual reasons for gratitude and that we are called to develop this quality in our lives, the obvious question we must ask ourselves is “So how do we become more thankful?” This chapter begins the quest to answer that question.

First, we must understand that thankfulness *can* be developed – gratitude *can* be grown. The point made in the opening quote bears reflection in this regard. Although the analogy between gratitude and our physical taste buds was not developed further by John Ortberg, it’s a comparison that can be profitably explored because we can develop our sense of gratitude in the same way that our sense of taste can be developed.

Taste Buds and Thankfulness

Think about this for a moment. Our taste buds, containing the taste receptor cells that allow us to experience pleasure from what we eat and drink, are minor miracles of design and planning. Normally, we may not pay much attention to those tiny sensors, but without them eating even the finest foods would be an experience no different from chewing sawdust or polystyrene packing chips.

But the average human tongue has multiple thousands of taste-sensing cells, and although most people are not aware of it, these cells are also found on the soft palate of the mouth, the upper esophagus, the insides of the cheeks, and the back of the throat.

Some people are also naturally blessed with heightened abilities of taste through having a greater number of taste buds than others. These people – representing only about 20 percent of the

population – are known to science as “supertasters.” Most of us (about 60 percent of the population) have an average number of taste buds, but another 20 percent of the population is composed of individuals known as “non-tasters” as they have fewer taste buds than average.

But however many taste buds we may have, it is a fact that anyone – even so-called “non-tasters” – can increase their ability to recognize a great many flavors. That ability to develop our sense of taste is the reason some people become connoisseurs of fine foods and wines. Those who train themselves in this way develop the ability to distinguish even the slightest differences among thousands of tastes – and to appreciate and enjoy them to a heightened extent.

Our sense of gratitude and appreciation is certainly no different. God gives us the capacity for thankfulness, but we must develop it. We certainly don’t derive real joy from the things we receive if we are oblivious to receiving them.

On the other hand, those who learn to develop gratitude in their lives enjoy and profit from the gifts they receive immeasurably more than those who do not. And although some people may seem to be naturally more appreciative than others (perhaps we could call them “super-appreciators”), the truth is that we can all develop our capacity for appreciation in life. And that is something, as we saw in the last chapter, that we are commanded to do in dozens of biblical verses.

The apostle Paul’s words: “Giving thanks always and for everything ...” (Ephesians 5:20 ESV) don’t just describe the lives of a few people born as “super-appreciators” – they represent a goal that we can all work toward.

We may not become connoisseurs of fine wines or foods, but the God who gives us all things to enjoy (James 1:17) invites, encourages, and even commands us – for the sake of our own heightened enjoyment and his praise – to become connoisseurs of his gifts.

Calculating Our Blessings

How do we develop our sense of gratitude to better honor the instruction to be appreciative for the good things in our lives? We must begin, of course, by learning to recognize the blessings we have been given. Often, people may speak of “counting our blessings” when considering the good things that we have been given. But “calculating our blessings” with the help of an adding machine or calculator may be more appropriate when we really begin to see them!

This is especially true because it is very human for us to look around at what we have in the here and now. Yet when we look back and consider the blessings we have enjoyed over time, for so many of us the numbers begin to require calculating help.

Our perspective also begins to change when we realize that many things we may take for granted are only occasionally enjoyed by a large percentage of the world's population. For example, think of the statistic that if we can afford to eat three meals a day for three weeks in a row, we are among the top 15% of the richest people in the world. But if we consider our three meals a day, multiplying that number by the number of days in our lives might help us better realize the number of blessings we enjoy – in that one area alone.

The same truth applies in so many areas, of course. The doctor's and dentist's visits we may grumble about having to fit into our schedules seem different when we remember the very occasional access so many have to medical or dental care – if they have it at all. If we have a steady job, the number of days for which we get paid adds up quickly compared to those who are without a job or who are unable to work – time for the calculator again. And what about the gift of life itself?

Do we see each day we are given as a true gift or do many of those mega-micro-gifts pass by unnoticed? And, of course, in many ways we are blessed in what we do *not* see in our lives. As the old saying goes: “Thankfulness also includes being grateful for all the

problems we do not have.” Even though we all have problems, there are many others we don’t have that we can add to our list.

We could go on, of course, but the point is obvious enough. We don’t really need to get out a calculator to try to add up the huge numbers of good things we have received, but then again, if we tried to add up all our blessings, we would need one. As King David wrote in thanking God for his gifts: “Surely you have granted ... unending blessings...” (Psalm 21:6).

Developing Appreciation

After learning to recognize our blessings, the second part of developing gratitude is coming to appreciate them more fully. One of the primary ways to do this is to learn to focus better on the things we perhaps don’t usually think about and may often take for granted.

Here again the analogy of our taste buds applies. Just as a connoisseur learns to focus on the specific characteristics of individual foods and wines, when we make a habit of focusing on the gifts we receive, we learn to better appreciate them, to give thanks for them, and to credit them to God as we should. We can easily improve our focus on this. Consider just a few of the ways we can come to see the gifts we are given more clearly:

Make time for them. Taking even a couple of minutes a day to think about our blessings can have a tremendous effect on developing our appreciation for them. But, like any other activity we may try to schedule, it is important to set a specific time each day if we can. That’s often the only way to make the practice a habit. The psalmist tells us “At midnight I rise to give you thanks ...” (Psalm 119:62) and while midnight might not be the best time for us, any time is good if we can set it aside!

Write them down. Keeping a gratitude list when we go over the things for which we can be thankful certainly helps us to grow in

this regard. It may be impossible to write down every gift we receive, but complete recording is not the point. The simple act of writing down and thinking about many of the gifts we receive helps us to become more aware of them and to appreciate them more.

Look at them closely. The more we think about a gift, the more we usually come to appreciate it. Sometimes we see added dimensions to the blessing that we would not have otherwise noticed. And it can often really heighten our appreciation for the people and things around us to spend even a small amount of time thinking about what life would be like without those blessings. That may be an obvious example, but the more we are aware of small gifts, the more we see the large ones in true perspective.

Tell someone about them. This is easy enough if we have spouses, family members or close friends with whom we can talk openly. Naturally, the people with whom we talk don't need to know about every small detail of all that we appreciate in life; but telling others about serious blessings is the opposite side of confession of our faults – it tells others how good God is – as well as helping them better realize the gifts they have. Ephesians 5:4 shows thanksgiving is a good topic of conversation!

Share them with someone. This means literally “sharing” what we have received where this is appropriate. We may not be able to share some of the most basic gifts in life, but then again, sometimes we can. We can share many aspects of our physical blessings by giving part of what we earn to good causes, loaning items to people who need them, giving of our time, and by sharing in many other ways. If you read through your “gratitude list” every so often, you may find a number of things that are appropriate to share. Whatever it may be, when we share a gift, we focus on it and often appreciate it more ourselves.

Give thanks for them. That thanksgiving should be a major part of our prayers is seen in what the apostle Paul wrote: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and *thankful* (Colossians 4:2, emphasis added). Ironically, but most importantly, we learn to better see and appreciate our gifts by giving thanks for them. The act of giving thanks itself forces us to focus on the things for which we can be thankful, but we will have more to say on that later.

Utilizing some or all of these simple techniques can help us develop our sense of gratitude to the point where we come to see gifts and blessings around us continually. But there is more to fully developed gratitude than simply coming to see our blessings and appreciating them. We will look at that truth next.

4. GRATITUDE IS MORE THAN JUST A FEELING

“Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

As we work on growing gratitude in our lives, we must also watch for the things that limit real thankfulness. One of the most common of these problems is the misunderstanding that gratitude is just a feeling. Many people think of gratitude as a feeling or emotion that we experience when we become aware of something we are fortunate to have received. But true thankfulness is much more than an emotion. As we will see in this chapter, there are three very good reasons we need to move beyond this view of gratitude.

Feelings Are Fickle

An important reason we should not view gratitude as a feeling is that, ultimately, our feelings cannot be trusted in this regard. Remember the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable who prayed: “... God, I *thank you* that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11, emphasis added). The Pharisee *felt* thankful, but his emotion was based on wrong feelings of comparison and self-satisfaction!

Even when our attitudes are right, we can still be led astray by our feelings. If you and I were to tour an area where some of the poorest people in the world live, we might well experience deep feelings of gratitude for what we have. Yet if we were to tour, even a few hours later, a community in which the very rich live, we might feel no gratitude at all and might even feel dissatisfied with some of our own possessions – yet nothing would have changed in terms of what we actually have.

Seeing gratitude as a feeling we experience can lead to situations where we only express appreciation when we *feel* thankful and not at the many other times when it should really be in our minds. True gratitude is understood in the mind and heart even when it is not felt. That is why Paul could write:

... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want (Philippians 4:11-12).

When the apostle says he has learned to be content, the word he uses means to be content independent of external circumstances. For Paul this involved being *appreciative* of what he had – no matter how little or how much. As he had told the Philippians only a few verses earlier: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with *thanksgiving*, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6, emphasis added). In that sense, the “secret” Paul says he had learned was doubtless one of appreciation and contentment apart from how life “felt” in the moment (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

The positive side of understanding that feelings by themselves are fickle and that we cannot base our gratitude on them is that we can learn to give thanks even when we may not feel particularly thankful – and those thanks will be just as valid as when we feel full of appreciation!

Gratitude Needs to Be Spoken

We can fall victim to another kind of problem when we know that we “feel” thankful, but do not express our feelings. The truth is, feeling appreciation without expressing it is often simply being pleased with the gifts we have received. The American writer William Ward expressed this fact colorfully when he wrote: “Feeling

gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.” We may feel thankful, but we need to give thanks for the gratitude to be real. At the human level, sadly, many parents and grandparents experience sorrow when gifts that they have given to their children or grandchildren are never acknowledged by them. Perhaps more than anyone else, parents often give without expecting any return or appreciation, but when children do not learn (or are not taught) to express appreciation, they end up seeing only the gift and not the love that lies behind the gift.

The same is true in our relationship with our heavenly Father. That is why the Bible continually tells us to “give thanks” rather than to just “feel thankful” – gratitude must move beyond inner feelings to outward expression if it is to be complete. We saw earlier how praise and thanksgiving are related in the Bible and how the two go hand in hand.

So, when King David wrote: “I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds” (Psalm 9:1), we see that giving thanks and speaking what God has done for us are synonymous. That is why we include thanksgiving in our prayers, of course. Have you ever noticed what the Bible says about Daniel (apparently one of the most righteous individuals to have ever lived – Ezekiel 14:14): “... Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God ...” (Daniel 6:10). For righteous Daniel, expressing thanks to God was a central part of prayer.

Yet praising and thanking God are not the only reasons why our gratitude must be expressed. It is as we express gratitude faithfully and regularly that we grow to be more grateful for the things for which we may not even feel thankful at a given time. Just as in C.S. Lewis’ famous comment that even if we do not particularly feel love toward others, if we act the love, we will come to feel it – so it is with appreciation. It is sometimes only as we thank that thankfulness awakens within us.

Of course, our words of gratitude must be sincere even if they are not backed up by our emotions. Saying that we are appreciative of

something when we really don't appreciate it at all is just as bad as feeling thankful and not saying it! But the point should be clear. Just as children must learn to express appreciation, so we as adults must also learn to express thankfulness in various situations, and it is in expressing thanks that we grow to be thankful at those times.

Thankfulness in Action

There is yet another reason why gratitude must be more than an experienced emotion. Fully developed gratitude is applied appreciation – it is thankfulness in action. As the Christian scholar and writer W.T. Purkiser wrote: “Not what we say about our blessings, but how we use them, is the true measure of our thanksgiving.” It is often said that those who are most thankful share the most, and there may be truth in this. Certainly, the more we are aware of our blessings, the more we feel how extensive they are – and thus may well feel that we have much that we can share.

The Bible does make it clear that thankfulness and sharing are related. The apostle Paul's writings underscore this in a number of ways. We see the connection especially in his letters to the Corinthian church – letters that include much that we might call “lessons in applied thanksgiving.”

Notice, for example, what Paul tells the Corinthians regarding good works: “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God” (2 Corinthians 9:12). Here we see service to other people leading to their giving thanks, but Paul speaks just as much about our giving thanks in things we do – including even participation in the Lord's Supper: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16). Paul makes it clear that thankfulness for the sacrifice of Christ and participation in the sacrament cannot be separated.

Paul even shows that thanksgiving should be linked to action in terms of public expressions of gratitude. He stresses this in the context of people in the Corinthian Church who were “speaking in tongues”:

... when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else ... say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified (1 Corinthians 14:16-17).

In other words, Paul stresses, our public expression of gratitude should lead, as much as possible, to other people being edified – our thanksgiving should be tied to action that helps others.

Moving beyond Feelings

In all these ways – and perhaps more – we see that we can and should grow beyond simply “feeling” thankful. For gratitude to be complete, it must often be based not in feelings, but in careful thought. We must also learn to express our gratitude, knowing that unspoken thanks are not really thanks at all. And finally, we can learn and grow in the understanding that our gratitude is made complete when we pair it with action that demonstrates our thankfulness. As we learn to apply these principles, we come to be more thankful, to better thank the One from whom all gifts ultimately come (James 1:17), and we move beyond simply *giving* thanks to *living* thanks.

5. GRATITUDE IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST US

“... so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:15).

Once we begin to apply the truth that gratitude can be developed and increased in our lives, we can move on to a deeper understanding of thanksgiving from a biblical perspective.

Humanly, it is easy to think of gratitude as being our response to what we have personally received (or been spared!), but full and mature gratitude doesn't stop at the boundaries of our own lives.

It is certainly right and good to focus on appreciating and expressing gratitude for the blessings that we have received, but biblical thankfulness goes well beyond that. Perhaps the best place to see this fact is in the writings of the apostle Paul.

The Apostle of Thanksgiving

There is no doubt that when the writings of the New Testament apostles are compared, it is Paul who might be called “the apostle of thanksgiving.” Paul uses the word for “thanks” in its various forms more than all other New Testament writers combined, and all except two of Paul's epistles (Galatians and Titus) speak of giving thanks or the quality of thankfulness.

Even in his epistles that don't mention thankfulness specifically, we can see Paul's underlying attitude of gratitude implicit in what he says, for example, regarding the hope of eternal life (Titus 1:2), and God's grace, salvation (Titus 2:11), kindness, love, and mercy (Titus 3:4-6).

But in the majority of Paul's writings, the expression of gratitude is an explicit part of his message. Typically, after greeting his

readers, or very soon after, Paul gives thanks. This was common in the world of his day, where individuals writing to others would often give thanks to their gods for benefits and blessings they had received. But in Paul's writing the thanksgiving is different. Instead of just thanking God for blessings he has received, Paul frequently gives thanks for those to whom he is writing.

Look at some examples of this in the apostle's writings. Paul tells the believers in Rome: "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world" (Romans 1:8). Similarly, he tells the Colossians:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven... (Colossians 1:3-5 ESV).

The apostle likewise told the Philippians: "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3-5). In his letter to the Ephesians Paul says: "...because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1:15-16 ESV).

If we read his epistles carefully, we see that Paul's thankfulness is frequently expressed not for things he had received, but far more often for the gifts God had bestowed in the lives of others.

Gratitude for What Others Have Received

That's an interesting thought to consider. The apostle Paul was not just the "apostle of thanksgiving," he was also the apostle who primarily gave thanks for others. Paul certainly was thankful for the encouragement and help of others – as we see, for example, in the book of Acts: "The brothers and sisters there had heard that we

were coming, and they traveled ... to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged” (Acts 28:15).

But Paul was also thankful on behalf of others – grateful for what they had received. This is exactly what he is doing in the many scriptures where he offers thanks. In the book of Romans, for example, we read: “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance” (Romans 6:17).

In fact, when we understand this principle, we realize it is typical of Paul that he writes: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made *for all people*” (1 Timothy 2:1, emphasis added). This does not mean that Paul was somehow thankful for the existence of everyone, but that he is telling us we can pray and give thanks on behalf of others – not only praying for their needs, but also giving thanks for what they have received.

Thanksgiving on behalf of others was truly an integral part of Paul’s life, and he also clearly expected other Christians to be doing the same: “...as you help us by your prayers ... many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us ...” (2 Corinthians 1:11). Here we see that Paul fully expected Christians would be offering thanks for the help he and his co-workers received. We may have often read Paul’s words regarding both praying for and giving thanks on behalf of others (1 Timothy 2:1), but do we consistently do both?

There are many ways in which we too can apply the principle of giving thanks for others. Although we may already feel and express gratitude for blessings received by our spouses, children or friends, what about others further from the center of our lives? How about the fact that someone we don’t even know recovered from an illness, or came to the knowledge of the truth? We know that we should even pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44), but if we should pray and give thanks for everyone, how often do we give thanks on behalf of even our enemies for the gifts God has given them (Matthew 5:45)?

The apostle Paul's attitude of thankfulness for the benefits received by others provides a lesson we can all keep in mind. How much of our gratitude is focused on what we personally have to be thankful for, and how much is focused on thankfulness for God's gifts to his people – and to all people – everywhere? Paul shows us that full thankfulness always includes gratitude for others and what they have received physically and spiritually, just as much as it is gratitude for what we ourselves have received. It is one of the ways in which we can come to love others as ourselves (Matthew 22:39, etc.), and it is one of the deepest expressions of true gratitude that we can learn.

6. GRATITUDE CHANGES EVERYTHING

“And you will say in that day: ‘Give thanks to the Lord...’” (Isaiah 12:4).

Throughout this book we have talked about many ways in which developing gratitude in our lives can help both us and others. In this closing chapter we will tie those thoughts together and look a little more deeply at some of the most important reasons why the often-neglected virtue of thankfulness is so vital for the Christian life. Consider three important aspects of this truth:

The Joy Connection: Gratitude Brings Happiness to Us

Although, as we saw earlier, gratitude is not just a feeling, it is true that the more we express appreciation, the more we find happiness in doing so. This is because lasting happiness is not found in occasionally expressing thanks, but in developing and maintaining a grateful attitude and disposition. We grow both our gratitude and our joy as we learn to give thanks mentally whenever we become aware of a blessing we are receiving, and also through regular gratitude-filled prayer. Using this dual approach, we not only make the practice of thanksgiving a habit, but also, at an even deeper level, we come to make appreciation a part of our nature.

This is important because it is only this kind of ongoing attitude of thankfulness that can protect us from ingratitude and its resulting problems of envy and resentment. Without gratitude we live lives of always taking what we have for granted and endlessly wanting more. This approach to life brings very little happiness – and what little joy it does bring is usually short-lived or all too frequently negated by alternating feelings of entitlement and frustration.

However, once we come to see our very existence and everything we have within it as a gift, our lives change dramatically. We no longer measure our happiness by what we have or do not have. Gratitude for what we have been given humbles us and helps us to see the value of every gift we receive. Our lives become much happier as we begin to recognize and to more deeply enjoy things we would otherwise have taken for granted. As the apostle Paul wrote, we come to be “overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:7), and our heightened sense of God’s protection and blessing means that we are more likely to look to the future with hope rather than with anxiety.

But there are even deeper spiritual reasons why making gratitude part of our lives creates lasting happiness. Because thankfulness in all situations is the ultimate expression of the acceptance of God’s will, gratitude is the ultimate banisher of bitterness. Although age, accident, illness or other problems may rob us of many things in our lives, gratitude sees what remains, not what was lost. We may not be able to run, but gratitude is thankful that we can still walk. We may not be able to sing, but gratitude is truly appreciative that we can still talk. This is not a matter of living by a “half-full glass” versus a “half-empty glass” kind of psychology, but a matter of sane spiritual perspective. When we come to see everything as a gift from the One who gives and takes away (Job 1:21), we are much less likely to be affected by bitterness and more likely to accept what is as what is best.

In fact, when we are gratitude-focused, we better recognize the activity of God behind every circumstance, even the seemingly bad ones – just as the patriarch Joseph was able to do after his brothers sold him as a slave and he said: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20 ESV).

This kind of full and ongoing gratitude not only brings us happiness and liberates us from many of the failings of our own inherent human nature, but also it becomes a source of ongoing encouragement that inspires us to live more productive lives that are shaped by thankfulness.

Active Gratitude: Gratitude Brings Happiness to Others

Researchers Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley decided to study the benefits of gratitude on personal well-being. To test their theory, they conducted a series of three experiments with hundreds of participants. Each person wrote an email to someone in their lives expressing gratitude. Afterward, they asked the participants to predict how the recipients would react to their letters in terms of how surprised and happy the message made them feel.

As it turns out, all participants in the study, no matter their race, age, or gender, consistently underestimated the positive impact the letters would have on the people reading them. Contrary to their predictions, the letters had overwhelmingly positive responses. In fact, the recipients frequently described feeling very touched, surprised, and happy about receiving the letters.

The study, published in the *Journal of Psychological Science*, reveals a very interesting aspect of human behavior. People tend to undervalue the huge positive impact that gratitude has on themselves and others.

While it is a fact that many good works have been accomplished in this world by individuals who were moved to challenge and change unhappy situations, our active gratitude for good things can also sometimes affect others in a positive manner far beyond what we might expect.

I recently saw a perfect and inspiring example of this in the newsletter of a cleft palate repair charity. It told the story of Natsir, a poor farmer from Indonesia. Two of his sons, Alwi and Winner, were born with cleft lips, but Natsir's meager income meant that getting surgery for his children was impossible. An American tourist passing through his area told Natsir of the cleft charity that could help him, and as a result of this information the farmer was able to arrange for both of his sons to receive free cleft repair surgeries.

After experiencing what must indeed have seemed like unbelievable good fortune, Natsir was immensely grateful and his

thankfulness led him to begin to look for other children suffering with clefts who could be helped in the same way his own children had been. Although unable to help them financially, the grateful father began volunteering as much time as possible to find these children and to bring them to the cleft charity doctors. The newsletter told how in less than two years, Natsir's gratitude-driven commitment helped over 70 children with cleft lips and palates receive free surgeries – rescuing them from the same plight his own children had suffered through a disfigurement that impacted their social interactions and education and even such basic aspects of life as speaking and eating.

This story underscores the truth that deep thankfulness has immense potential to “grow” good where there was none before. As Christians we find that because our lives are changed, we are thankful; but our thankfulness also helps change our lives and those of others. It's a point worth pondering – the more we focus on appreciation for the good we have been given, the more good we can bring about in the lives of those affected by our gratitude. Paul spoke of this chain-reaction when he wrote to the Corinthians: “All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:15).

The Gift of Gratitude: Gratitude Brings Happiness to God

Although God gives us the potential for gratitude, our thankfulness is one of the few things we can give to God that does not originate with him. While this may sound surprising, it's clear that anything physical we give to God ultimately came from him to begin with, and this is true of most spiritual things, also. Take love, for example. Although we may often feel our love for God is something that we produce, the Bible is clear that much of it originates with God. Not only does Scripture tell us that we love God and others “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19), but it specifically states that: “... God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the

Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). But there are no such scriptures regarding gratitude. Instead, as we have seen, we find the Bible continually urging us to gratitude that, while it may be strengthened by God, must originate with us.

Precisely because gratitude is something that comes from us and is offered to God, our expressions of thanks are themselves prayers with which God can be truly pleased. Gratitude becomes a sacrifice we make – just as we read in the Old Testament: “... I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving” (Jonah 2:9 NKJV). Perhaps better than anything else, regularly expressed gratitude can help us stay close to God in our daily walk with him. Pain and problems may bring us to God at times, but it is gratitude that “holds the door open” for us and helps make our fellowship continual.

That is perhaps why the virtue of gratitude figures so prominently within the Scriptures and why study of them can guide us in further developing this attitude. But the importance of thankfulness in our relationship with God is particularly stressed in two books of the Bible – one in the Old Testament and one in the New.

In the Old Testament you doubtless guessed that the book stressing gratitude above all others is the book of Psalms. If you would like to further develop thankfulness to God in your life, a first priority should be to read the psalms from this perspective. It is in Psalms that we find an expression that appears more times than any other in the Bible regarding gratitude: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Psalm 107:1, etc.). This expression appears in many different contexts throughout the book, and it is by reading them carefully that we can come to learn much about what the grateful life looks like.

In the New Testament, perhaps again not unexpectedly, the book that stresses gratitude more than any other is one of the apostle Paul’s epistles – his letter to the Colossians. Gratitude is a theme to which the apostle returns repeatedly in this letter, and we could hardly end this book in a more fitting way than by quoting again the verse from Colossians with which we began it:

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

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