

“GRACE AND GRATITUDE”

Scripture lesson: Colossians 3:12-17

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There is a story told about two men walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. They instantly began running toward the nearest fence. The charging bull followed in hot pursuit and it was soon apparent they wouldn't make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, "Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!"

John answered, "I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life."

"But you must!" implored his companion. "The bull is catching up to us."

"All right," panted John, "I'll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: *'O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.*"

I am not sure that Paul had this situation in mind when he wrote in Colossians, *Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through him.* Whatever you do, give thanks to God.

In this part of Colossians, Paul is listing those qualities of the Christian life: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And over all these virtues, put on love. He ends it saying, *in whatever you do give thanks to God.*

More than grace we might say at mealtime, gratitude is a way of life. It is the one quality that serves as the foundation of all the others Paul lists. Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience are the products of a life lived in gratitude to God for his inexpressible gift, as Paul writes in II Corinthians 9. Without a profound sense of gratitude, we are not likely to exhibit compassion, kindness, humility, patience.

Missionary and theologian, Albert Schweitzer, said *the secret of life is giving thanks for everything.* Someone else wrote that *gratitude is the fertilizer for well-being.* Cicero: *the act of gratitude is the source of goodness.* And that is more than just his opinion.

Psychologist Hans Seyle, who is a pioneer in studying those factors that contribute to human happiness, says there are two attitudes that most influence the quality of our everyday life – our peace of mind: our feelings of security or insecurity and fulfillment or frustration. Two attitudes that most determine whether we will be successful or not.

The most destructive human emotion is revenge – it does more than anything else to diminish our quality of life. The other emotion is gratitude. Gratitude is the one emotion that accounts for the absence of stress. The one emotion that can foster success. Gratitude is one of the few things that can measurably change a person's life for the good.

Psychologist Robert Emmons has written a book with the title, *Thanks.* In his studies, he has found that people who regularly practice gratitude, experience high levels of positive emotion such as joy, enthusiasm, happiness, love and optimism. Gratitude protects people from those destructive human impulses such as envy, resentment, greed and bitterness.

He also found that people who practice gratitude are healthier physically – they have stronger immune systems, less aches and pains, lower blood pressure. They are more social, more generous and compassionate. Feel less lonely and isolated.

“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life.
It turns what we have into enough, and more.
It turns denial into acceptance,
chaos to order, confusion to clarity.
Gratitude makes sense of our past,
brings us peace for today,
and creates a vision for tomorrow.” Lewis Smedes

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.

But just because gratitude is a good thing, doesn't mean that it is always easy. Emmons says that a life of gratitude takes effort; it is not for the intellectually lazy. In fact, a life of gratitude goes against the grain; it is at odds with some deeply ingrained psychological tendencies.

For one thing, we human beings have an innate “negativity bias.” Bad news travels faster than good news and lasts longer. I read the report of a study this week by Roy Baumeister who has looked at this. What he and others have found is that bad emotions have more impact than good ones. We process bad emotions more thoroughly than we do good ones. We store bad memories and recall them more frequently.

Win the lottery, and the euphoria is over quickly, the winner goes back to the same happiness level as before. Have an accident, the effects are much longer lasting. In short, being a grouch comes more naturally than being grateful.

The second thing that mitigates against gratitude is a “self-serving” bias. When good things happen to us, we are quick to take credit, but when bad things happen, we are quick to blame others. It's like the woodpecker that was pecking away on a tree, one day, when lightning hit the tree exploding it, shattering it into a million pieces. After the initial shock, the woodpecker picked himself up and boasted to anyone who would listen, *Look what I did!* When we feel like we deserve the good fortune that comes our way, that it is all our doing, then there is little room for gratitude, only self-congratulations.

But to cut ourselves off from gratitude is like cutting off our nose to spite our face, as my grandmother use to say. A life of ingratitude is a life diminished; robbed of joy.

Whatever you do, in word or deed...give thanks to God the father.

Because of the negative and self-serving bias, we don't become grateful people just by thinking that we want to be, there is a skill involved. We have to work at it.

The practice of gratitude requires three things. We must notice, reflect and express.

The Psalmist invites us *to taste and see that the Lord is good*. Gratitude requires that we develop a habit of paying attention, to notice concrete ways in which we are supported in life, surrounded by grace. We affirm that there are good things in life: gifts and benefits which we have received that we did nothing to deserve. We recognize those deep connections – ways in which we are related to others – the support we are given. We come to understand that no man is an island unto himself.

Paul says whatever we do, we are to give thanks. This doesn't mean that life is perfect. It certainly wasn't perfect for Paul. Bad things happen. We all know disappointment and defeat from time to time. There are hassles and burdens to bear. But when we look at life as a whole, a grateful heart helps us to see the goodness that is there.

Gertaz Weismann was among the prisoners in a Nazi death camp. In an interview she said, *People often asked me, "Why did you go on? Why did you survive?" There is one picture that comes to mind. I was standing at a window when I first got to camp, and I asked myself if one wish could be granted to me, what would it be? And the picture that came to mind was a picture at home: my father smoking his pipe, my mother working on needlepoint, my brother and I doing homework. And I thought, 'My goodness, that was just a boring evening at home.' But I knew that picture would be, if I could help it, the driving force of my survival!*

A simple thing, an evening at home within the warmth and security of family. But when that picture came to her mind – when she noticed the grace in the everyday – it provided her with the strength to survive.

In her poem, entitled "Otherwise," the poet Jane Kenyon reflects on her blessings:

I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise.
 I ate cereal, sweet milk, a ripe, flawless peach. It might have been otherwise.
 I took the dog uphill to the birch wood. All morning I did the work I love.
 We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise.
 I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and planned another day just like this day...

Kenyon wrote this poem in 1993, shortly after hearing that her husband had cancer. There is much in life that could be otherwise. To notice that is to realize how much we have for which to be thankful. There is goodness to life when we notice; when we practice attention.

Secondly, the practice of gratitude requires reflection. We have to figure out where all this goodness comes from. We realize that most of what is good comes from outside ourselves. It doesn't stem from anything that we did to deserve it. There is a "giftedness" to life. We have been given gifts, large and small, to help us achieve our place in life. George Colman reminds us to *praise the bridge that carried you over.*

In the book of Deuteronomy, before they enter the Promise Land, the people of Israel are reminded of what got them there; who got them there. *Be careful, that you don't forget the Lord your God, Moses says, so that when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, and you begin to boast and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness. Take care lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.*

The gifts that allow us to experience the goodness of life didn't come from nowhere. They came from God. The only reason why any of us exists at all lies in the mystery of why God gave us the gift of life. As Lewis Smedes puts it: *we take our every step in the energy of mercy. We breathe every breath in the atmosphere of grace. We think every thought, feel every feeling through the creative power of love. We see each flower, taste each drop of water, sense the presence of each person around us, through the gift of consciousness.*

When we reflect on where goodness comes from, we will need no one to tell us we are truly thankful. We know that it is grace that has brought us safe thus far and grace will bring us home.

Thirdly, gratitude to be gratitude must be expressed. Someone has said that feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it. There is no such thing as gratitude unexpressed. If it is unexpressed, it is plain old-fashioned ingratitude. In exit interviews of good people who leave companies, one of the top reasons they give for leaving is ingratitude – lack of appreciation. No one bothered to say thank you for a job well done. Gratitude unexpressed stifles the human spirit. It destroys community.

I like the way novelist William Faulkner put it when he wrote that, *gratitude is a quality similar to electricity, it must be produced and discharged and used up to exist at all.*

Saying thank you creates what Donald Posterna calls the “spiral of joy,” it opens the door to further acts of grace and gratitude. It brings out the best in people. If you want better service at a restaurant say thank you. If you want your wife to cook that special meal again, thank her. Give her a gift.

One way we express thanks is through giving. When we want to say thank you to someone, often we give a gift. Lewis Smedes says that *giving and gratitude go together like humor and laughter.*

In Charles Dickens classic story, *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is a miserly, grumpy old man who saves every penny he makes. He has no real friends. No joy in his life, until the night he is visited by spirits who show him what his life might have been like, and what the end will be. He will die a lonely old man grieved by no one, his life wasted.

When he wakes up from his night visitations to discover that he is still alive, he is giddy with joy, alive to gratitude! The first thing he does is to buy gifts – a goose for the family of Bob Cratchet, presents for his nephew. Gratitude and giving go together.

In II Corinthians, Paul writes that giving and generosity overflows with thanksgiving to God. Giving is a way that we acknowledge the grace by which we live. It is a joyful act of saying, thanks be to God for his gifts.

That’s why, when we present our offering in worship, we sing the doxology – *doxos* means thanksgiving, *logos* means words. Through this act, we are saying thank you to God.

On World Wide Communion Sunday, we had the bishop from Nigeria with us. In that country, when they present the offering you come forward. In fact, you dance down the aisles to lay your gift on the altar! It is a joyful, spirited time. A celebration of all that God has done, is doing, and will do!