

What We Believe: Gratitude

In September of 1620 a ship called the Mayflower set sail from Plymouth Harbor in England headed for the new land of America. It carried 101 passengers and had another arrive during the voyage, the youngest settler in Massachusetts. They didn't anchor until well into December and so spent the winter on the ship while coming ashore during the daylight to build the structures that would be their first homes come spring. But during that winter, disease spread among these early settlers and by spring more than half of them had died.

About 1/3 of those who survived, who would become known as the Pilgrims, were separatists who had left the Church of England. That fall, they held a three-day festival of thanksgiving, sharing food and fellowship with the people native to the area, people who had helped them through their first winter and who now brought five deer to help with the thanksgiving feast.

So, imagine this. A hundred people come across the Atlantic and arrive at the wrong place, exhausted and already suffering illness. Half of them die from disease in the first few months they are there and they have to scratch a living from the land while building their first homes. And less than a year later they are holding the first American Thanksgiving. What does that tell you about these people?

1. It tells you that they were Christian people who recognized that God's grace had sustained those who survived through the roughest patch of establishing a permanent settlement in America. There's no other world view that would have inspired thanksgiving.
2. It tells you that people who recognize God's grace at work in their lives will experience and express their gratitude in some way.

The celebration of thanksgiving didn't become an annual event for over 200 years after the pilgrims held their feast in 1621.

The first Europeans to celebrate Thanksgiving in Canada were Sir Martin Frobisher and his crew after they landed on Baffin Island in the eastern Arctic in 1578 - that's right, way before the first American Thanksgiving!

While you might think they ate turkey with mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce, that first meal was salt beef, biscuits and mush peas. From Wikipedia:

Mayster Wolfall, a learned man, appointed by Her Majesty's Counsel to be their minister and preacher, made unto them a godly sermon, exhorting them especially to be thankful to God for their strange and miraculous deliverance in those so dangerous places.

The expedition had been plagued by ice and freak storms, which had at times scattered the fleet of 15 ships. But only one had been lost when they gathered for this first thanksgiving - and a celebration of communion - at Frobisher Bay at the south end of

Baffin Island. Although there were a number of celebrations of Thanksgiving through the following centuries, it didn't become an annual event until 1879, 300 years after the first.

Who celebrates Thanksgiving for a voyage that has failed in its two missions: finding the Northwest Passage and starting a small settlement? People who recognize that there is someone there to thank, and people who are aware that they have been spared in dangerous circumstances. So, from these two accounts of people surviving life-threatening challenges and then turning to God to give Him thanks - despite pain, despite losses - we see gratitude expressed as a Christian value.

Let's go back again to our Romans 1 passage, where Paul describes what has gone wrong with the world. In verses 18-20 he has said that God has made Himself known to human beings through His creation of the world, but that the response of some has been to suppress the truth, hide this knowledge of God.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.
(1:21)

Notice how this pattern develops. The crucial turning point in Paul's argument in Romans 1 is that we knew - human beings knew that there is a Creator, but they chose to deny that knowledge. What human rebellion against God is rooted in is the refusal to give Him glory or to give Him thanks.

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I find that such an interesting insight - that a lack of gratitude could lead to futile thinking and hearts that are darkened. Why wouldn't people want to give thanks to God for the blessings of life? What is it that keeps us from desiring to give Him glory?

My first thought is that a person might be too proud to honor God. He or she thinks that they have earned everything they have, that they deserve whatever good has come to them. If you feel that way about life, you're not likely to honor God or to give thanks to Him.

My second thought is that a person might be too angry about life, too resentful about the things that haven't gone well and that person is more likely to blame God than to praise Him. It's no secret to anyone that life can be hard and that pain crosses our path repeatedly. There are lots of people who believe that if God were real and if He were good, He would find a way to eliminate the painful parts of life so that we could be constantly happy. People who hold these views are not only unlikely to be grateful to God, they are most likely self-absorbed and miserable.

My third thought on why people may be ungrateful in our day: they are being raised by postmodern people in a postmodern culture, which is anything but grateful. Postmodernism is a culture of resentment, where anyone who has anything is assumed

to have gained it in a way that victimized somebody else. It's an outlook on the world that is potentially extremely destructive, imposing guilt on virtually everyone and resentment as the appropriate response to the people around us. I've listened to a few talks by Dr. Jordan Peterson, who is a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, and who is known for standing up to the university which ordered all its staff to refer to every person with the pronoun of that person's choosing. Peterson has called this order the result of a Marxist bent in the Ontario Human Rights Commission and has refused to publicly state that he is willing to use the made-up pronouns of a politically motivated group. One of the talks I heard him give recently was on the topic "Freedom of Speech or Political Correctness" and, near the end of his talk, he addresses the issue of how to have a meaningful life.

He gives his listeners a choice between meaningless-ness - like gratifying your impulsive desires, without any responsibility - or living under the burden of "everything you do matters", and suggests that most of us, most of the time, pursue the first and not the second, because the second path, choosing a meaningful life, is hard. It involves embracing the suffering of life, and putting yourself together, and choosing meaningful actions that actually help people.

He tells the story of a friend of his who got wrecked in a motorcycle accident. He was a lineman, running electric wires, and his partner was struggling with Parkinson's disease. Together the guy wrecked from the accident and the man with Parkinson's could do the work of one; they had complementary deficiencies. But they would work out in the bitter cold of winter to repair broken lines and make sure the lights would keep working. He then says this:

That's how our civilization works. There's all these ruined people out there; they've got problems like you can't believe. Off they go to work and do things they don't even like and, look, the lights go on. It's unbelievable. It's a miracle, it's a miracle, and we're so ungrateful. College students, the post-modern types, are so ungrateful. They don't know that they're surrounded by a miracle.

This is another of the ways in which a Christian world view is under assault - and we need to be vigilant. We can fall into the pit that is being dug for us by the world around us, a pit of resentment, ingratitude and envy, and the result will be devastating for us and for those we care about.

So, how do we resist? In response to Romans 12:2 where Paul urges us to stop being conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, how do we do that?

1. I think the first step is to focus your thoughts on what you have received, what you have been blessed with, that makes your life better. And then you have to ask the question, "Who is responsible for this blessing in my life? Am I the one who has made these good things happen, or should I praise someone else?" James 1:17 tells us that everything that is good and perfect in our lives comes to us from God above.

And throughout both Old and New Testaments we are encouraged to give thanks to Him. We'll get to some of those passages as we move forward.

2. The other side of that coin is to avoid something, avoid becoming a whiner, a complainer, someone who is always bringing other people down because they can't see anything but problems. I know some people who have a right to complain, people like Noel who has had cancer and still deals with the effects of it ... or Lyle, who has every right to complain about the long chemo treatments or the effects they have on his body, but he accepts everything and welcomes every new day as a gift from God.
3. The third thing I think that will help us to resist the attitude of ingratitude is to look at the lives of people in this world who have nothing, or next to nothing. I remember my brother telling me about taking a team of young people to the Dominican Republic - many years ago now - and how embarrassed he was at the way his team behaved. Their hosts would walk for an hour to go and get them buckets of water to wash with and the youth would treat meal times as a sort of competition to see who could get the most food. The only way to describe it is selfishness that doesn't appreciate what's been done, what's been sacrificed for them. People who have nothing are way more generous than we in the West are. I remember thanking our hosts in West Germany for the care they took for us when we were on a mission with YWAM and the husband said, "This is nothing. If you went to East Germany where they are really poor, just out from under communist rule, they would give you everything they had and more." But our hosts had done so much for us - in fact, he had stayed up most of the night repairing a vehicle so we could drive.
4. But the greatest area where we need to grow in gratitude is in the need to acknowledge our sinful nature, our weakness in the face of temptation, and God's merciful response to us. Scripture tells us that we are accepted in the beloved, in Jesus. Scripture tells us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Scripture tells us that our Lord and Redeemer has gone to prepare a place for us so that where He is, we may be also. How can you not live gratefully when you know those things are true?

In the Old Testament, gratitude was taught through the rituals of national worship. For example, they had a specific offering called a "thank offering", through which the people learned to respond with gratitude to God's provision for them. And several of their kings led the way in this, actually appointing worship leaders whose role in leading was in giving thanks. King David, for example, once the ark of the covenant had been brought into Jerusalem, appointed people to lead the rest of the nation in giving thanks and he wrote quite a number of Psalms which exhorted the people to "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!" King Jehoshaphat appointed people to lead out in thanksgiving before they were to confront the three invading armies in 2 Chronicles 20. And King Hezekiah's leadership is described in 2 Chronicles 31:2:

Hezekiah assigned the priests and Levites to divisions - each of them according to their duties as priests or Levites - to offer burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, to minister, to give thanks and to sing praises at the gates of Yahweh's dwelling.

After the exile, we read that Nehemiah did something similar, appointing people to lead the rest of the nation in songs of thanksgiving to God. And Jeremiah talked about a coming day when God would restore the fortunes of Israel and their response would be to give thanks.

What's going on in these examples is that these godly leaders are instilling among their people the discipline of thanksgiving, teaching them to be grateful, teaching them that appreciation for what God has done for them is a high priority. Appreciation builds faith - I'm sure that's one of the reasons why the books of the Bible contain so many examples of retelling the stories of God's great acts of deliverance, so that the people of God wouldn't get bogged down with the challenges of the day, but would have confidence that God would see them through. That's an incredibly important lesson to learn and you see gratitude being taught in several ways through the history of Israel - of course the people still struggled with the challenges of the day and God had to confront their constant complaints and grumbling.

In the New Testament, there are numerous places where we are told to keep that same attitude alive:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 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. (Col. 3:15-17)

That passage contains three instructions related to thanksgiving: "Be thankful", have "gratitude in your hearts to God" and "give thanks to God the Father" as you go about your daily life, in whatever you do.

The writer of Hebrews gives a specific reason for being grateful in 12:28:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably ...

Here gratitude is seen as the appropriate response to what God has done and it's portrayed as an act of worship.

Paul describes his experience of being led by God into the most responsive mission fields in 2 Corinthians 2:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. (2:14)

These passages offer us different reasons for giving thanks, different circumstances under which we are to be grateful, but the overall effect of these and many other, similar New Testament passages is that they, too, help foster an awareness among believers of their need to express gratitude towards God, that thanksgiving should come as naturally as worship or prayer or anything else they do in response to what God does.

So, our applications for today are going to be about finding ways to be grateful, finding ways to express our thanks to God. Let's look at just a few:

1. In your prayer life, always begin by offering thanks for something. You may be desperate for an answer, for a need in your life, or in your family, but the best way to begin intercession is to thank God that He hears prayer, that He answers prayer, that He loves you and that cares about your need. Before you make your request, express your appreciation. You have a God who loves you, who works all things together for good to those who love Him, and who will hear you.
2. Do you know what the tenth commandment is? It's "You shall not covet" and goes on to list things that belong to your neighbor. And yet we have billions of dollars being spent -- it's called the advertising industry -- geared towards making you covet, making you want things you don't have. What do the 99% want? - the money that the 1% have. What do the so-called disenfranchised or 'outsider' groups want that the so-called insiders have? - the power that the insiders have. So the second application is to resist the spirit of envy that is so obviously in the world around us. Don't give in and spend your time feeling like your life is less worthwhile or less successful because you don't have some things that others have.
3. Do a study sometime of what people throughout history, or even people in other parts of the world, had to live on, what they had to do each day just to survive, the struggles of poverty and the lack of the supportive technologies we enjoy ... and reflect on all we have that makes our lives easier, more enjoyable, than any civilization in history.
4. Do an inventory of the people in your life who have helped you, encouraged you, blessed you in some way. Think about the friends you have made and the enjoyment you have from their presence, and from the experiences you share with them - and be thankful!
5. Most important, be continually grateful for all that God has done for you. We should never forget the cross, or the love that led Jesus there. We should never forget the hope that we have that could never have been ours without God's sacrifice. And we should never forget to be thankful - for life, for the peace that forgiveness brings, for the promises of God for our future, and for the gifts He gives to us in the present.