

The beauty of a thankful heart

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Pastor Tim Melton

A person who is thankful looks at life differently. Matthew Henry, the famous theological scholar, was once attacked by thieves and robbed of his bag that he was carrying. He wrote these words in his diary:

“Let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because, although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because, although they took all that I had, it was not that much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who was doing the robbing.”

That is a refreshing perspective, but would we be able to look at the situation like that if we were robbed?

Would you say that you are a thankful person? Are you more drawn to thankfulness or complaining? Do you view yourself more as one who is a victim or one who is blessed? Would you be characterized more by contentment or covetousness?

In Luke 17:11-19 we find this story of Jesus and the 10 lepers:

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem he (Jesus) was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” ¹⁴ When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

If we are honest with ourselves, with which of these lepers can we best relate? The one who was so thankful that his need had been met, or the ones who received the gift and just went on their merry

way? Most of us can relate to both. At times we are thankful, and at other times giving thanks does not even come to mind.

We can only speculate about the reasons that the other 9 lepers did not return to thank Jesus, but we find in this one Samaritan this equation. He had a great need. He received an undeserved great gift. In return he responded with gratitude.

Samaritans were viewed as second-class citizens, and lepers were ostracized from the community and seen as spiritually unclean. In his own mind the Samaritan leper very likely saw himself as the most undeserving recipient of a “beyond imagination” type of gift. Because of that, gratitude was his response. It could be the other 9 did not return to say “thank you” because they felt that they were entitled or deserved the miracle which they received because they were Jews, the favored descendants of Abraham.

We each are called to be thankful, but this is not our natural response. A lack of gratitude was first seen in the garden of Eden, back in Genesis 3. God had given Adam and Eve everything, and yet they were not grateful. They still wanted more, and because of this they chose to disobey and eat the forbidden fruit. We, too, are often guilty of discontentment and lacking gratitude.

Today’s culture makes it even worse. The media takes that root of sinfulness and selfishness that is found in mankind and seeks to amplify our sense of entitlement. It convinces us that we have the right to an easier life, a more comfortable existence, a more respected position. That we deserve better. Its message imbeds in us a heart of complaining and discontentment. It pits us against each other with a sense of competition, comparison and covetousness.

In Romans 1:19-21 the Apostle Paul talks of the world’s lack of thankfulness:

“What can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them.²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

God showed Himself to the world through His creation, but the unbeliever does not honor God or give Him thanks. A lack of gratitude is an attribute of those who are without God.

Now some would argue that they know unbelievers who are very gracious, thankful people, but what is the truth of this situation? A non-believer can be grateful, to an extent, as he or she seeks to focus on the benefit and good things that one has received, but the heart will still be disconnected from the True Gift Giver. James 1:17 tells us that *“Every good and perfect gift is from above.”* For anything good in our lives, our thanks should be first and foremost to God. In scripture thanksgiving is likened to a sacrifice of praise (Ps. 50:23), an act of worship.

While a non-believer may be able to be thankful in the horizontal plane, he or she misses the purpose and the good of gratitude when the thankfulness is misdirected or given to a mere mortal.

Think of it this way. Imagine that you are terminally ill. You have tried all your options, doctors, hospitals, health foods, experimental drugs, and natural treatments. The only cure is a rare medicine that costs 20 million euros. You don't have that kind of money. The amount of money needed is astronomical. It is impossible. So, you accept the fact that you are going to die. You prepare yourself spiritually. You begin to get your finances in order. You say your goodbyes to family and friends. And then one day, while you are eating breakfast the doorbell rings. Startled, you answer the door and there stands a delivery man who has a certified envelope for you. Inside you find a short note from the sender of the package expressing his love for you during this time of need. The envelope also contains a letter from the hospital certifying that this person has paid in full the 20 million euros for the treatment and all you need to do is contact the hospital to set the dates for your appointments to begin.

An overwhelming sense of gratitude in your heart takes over.

Now imagine in that moment of gratitude you begin to thank the delivery man for everything that he has done for you. For everything that he means to you. For the special place that he now holds in your heart. For the love that you have for him . . . That does not quite seem right. Why? Because you would be giving your greatest thanks to another, instead of the actual gift-giver. Yes, it is good to say thank you to the delivery man, and you might even give him an extra tip, but your biggest "thanks" would be reserved for the giver of the gift.

We must remember that *"Every good and perfect gift is from above"* (James 1:14-17). It is okay to give thanks to one another, but we would do well to follow the pattern of the Apostle Paul, who is often seen thanking God for others and what they had done for Him. In Romans 1:8, Paul says, *"I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all."* In Philippians 4 Paul gives thanks to God for what the Philippians had done to help him. In Colossians 1 Paul says, *"We always thank God . . . when we pray for you."*

Those who believe in Christ are rightly related with God to give Thanksgiving to Him, but even we, as followers of Christ, often seem to struggle in the area of gratitude.

For many this recent pandemic or even the recent rise in prices of many things has made being thankful even more difficult. When we are used to always wanting more, it is quite an abrupt change when things are taken away from us. When we lose the opportunities and the pleasures to which we are accustomed, then we are tempted to put away gratitude, and instead wallow in complaining, discontentment, feeling sorry for ourselves, or even questioning God because things are not going the way that we want. Life will have its difficult days, but the Apostle Paul gives us another option.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 he said:

"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Some may say, "That is easy for him to say, because he hasn't gone through my situation." That is correct, he has not gone through your situation, but Paul knew his own share of trials and tribulations. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 tells us that for the sake of the gospel Paul had been in prison, exposed to death multiple times, shipwrecked, beaten, whipped, stoned, in danger from thieves, in danger from rivers, in

danger in the city, in danger in the country, had gone without sleep, and even gone without food. Yet somehow, he was able to give thanks in all circumstances.

The question now becomes, was being thankful in all circumstances just an ability that God gave Paul, or is it really possible for us as well?

Paul is not telling us to ignore our pain when He instructs us to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). He is just giving us perspective. He is helping us see the reality of our trials in the midst of God’s working and against the backdrop of eternal life. Yes, there will be pain and trials and suffering, but God is always working, in and through us. And best of all, there will come a day when all of this will pass away and we will enter into our eternal home, into the presence of God. That is the reason for great gratitude.

So, what was Paul’s secret? The gospel. Paul had been an enemy of God, even to the point of persecuting Christ’s followers. If Paul had continued on this path, his penalty would have been eternal death, separated from God forever. Paul had been a chief of sinners, yet Jesus called to Paul, forgave him and gave him eternal life. He, like the Samaritan leper, realized his desperate need, his underserved gift, and responded with gratitude.

As believers, the difference between a thankful heart and an unthankful heart can often be traced back to our understanding of the gospel. We can see it more clearly in other writings of the Apostle Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 4:15 Paul wrote these words, *“For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”* The Gospel was spreading, and more and more people were finding salvation in Jesus Christ. The natural result was an increase of gratitude that gave glory to God for what He had done for them through Christ.

Thanksgiving is connected to grace. At salvation we come face to face with the full extent of our sinfulness (Romans 3:23). Christ took upon Himself the guilt of the sinfulness of mankind. He then paid for our sin by enduring the just wrath of God. Because of the price that Christ paid on our behalf, we have been spared and have now been made right with God. We have been saved and can take no credit for it. The only thing that we truly deserve is condemnation and death, but instead we have been given salvation.

As children of God we should live in this position of spiritual humility and indebtedness for God’s grace for the rest of our lives. It should result in a mindset that realizes that we don’t deserve anything. We don’t deserve the breath we just breathed, much less anything else that we receive in this life. Because of this, everything in life is an added bonus and a blessing. It births a heart of thanksgiving.

As we walk daily with Christ we will be drawn into the perfection of God and reminded more of the imperfections of self. It is like Simon Peter’s reaction in the presence of Christ, and Isaiah’s response when he saw God.

In the presence of Jesus, in Luke 5:8, Simon Peter proclaimed, *“Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”*

In the presence of God, in Isaiah 6:5, Isaiah said, *"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."*

As we remain near Christ, we are taken time and again to the truths of the cross. We are reminded of our spiritual bankruptcy, but also of the provision of God through the riches of Christ. From this undeserved position we will be thankful for everything. The extent of our gratitude will be in direct relationship to the understanding of our desperate need and the totally undeserved deliverance that has been found in Christ.

If one does not know Christ, or if a believer has drawn away from Christ, the opposite will occur. Spiritual humility, which comes from remembering one's sinfulness and God's grace, will be replaced by a sense of self-righteousness or entitlement. "I deserve better!" The focus goes from what God has done to what man can do. It will go from pleasing God to pleasing self. From humility, to pride. We will think more about the present than eternity. We will be desensitized to our sin and begin to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. But how can we? In 1 Corinthians 4:7 we read, *"What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"*

As we walk near to Christ our sinful past and God's gracious present come together to keep us in a humble and grateful frame of mind. There is no longer a need to escape or cover over our unhappiness, bitterness, or discontentment. Contentment becomes our reality because we know that we deserve nothing. Because of this, everything is a gift. We can be thankful in every circumstance. We are no longer "entitled and constantly demanding more".

John Newton, who lived in the 1700s, was an example of spiritual humility and gratitude. Although in the past he had been known as a stubborn, disobedient, vicious-tempered, slave trader, through Christ he was now a penitent child of God. He expressed his heart in these words of the well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace":

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Nearness to Christ reminds of us of our debt that has been paid, and this brings thankfulness.

Let's return to the earlier illustration of the delivery man bringing to your door the envelope that contained the news that the 20 million euro cost for your medical treatment has been paid and you no longer will die, but instead you will be cured of your terminal disease.

An overwhelming sense of gratitude in your heart takes over. Imagine later that day your dishwasher breaks, or your phone dies, or you lock yourself out of your apartment, or your video game controllers quit working. Those all are frustrating events, but in the midst of the 20 million euro medical treatment that is going to save your life, those inconveniences no longer rob you of your great sense of joy and gratitude.

In the same way, the good news of being given eternal life, when we deserved eternal death, should result in a mindset that realizes that from this point on everything is a gift. We don't deserve the breath we just breathed, the job we just lost, the hospital we stay in when we are sick, the laptop that broke, the coffee that spilt, the children who misbehave, the opportunity to retake the test that we failed, the marriage that is difficult sometimes, much less anything else that we receive in this life. Because of this, everything in life is an added bonus and a blessing. It births a heart of thanksgiving even in the midst of the challenges of life. This type of Gratitude should be our default perspective of life.

Before we came to know Christ, selfishness and entitlement was our natural way of living, but in Christ we have been given a new nature, a new natural way of living. Because of Christ, gratitude is to be our natural response.

When great need is responded to by a great gift the natural result should be great gratitude, but what is happening in our lives when we are not thankful?

It could be our theology is correct but we have forgotten it. As we remain near Christ we are taken time and again to the truths of the cross. The extent of our gratitude will be in direct relationship to the daily, moment by moment, remembering of the desperation of our need, and the complete, undeserved deliverance that has been found in Christ.

When we forget the gospel we are likely to lose our sense of continuous gratitude. We no longer live under the overarching source of greatest thankfulness. We instead will turn our attention to the immediate difficulties and forget the ongoing, eternal umbrella of blessing under which we live.

We turn to the world to meet needs that have already been met in Christ. We begin to question the wisdom and the goodness of our God. We cease to acknowledge all that we have already been given and we begin to long for the superficial things of this world that do not matter. It is like a teenager forgetting about their parents' ongoing goodness and provision, and becoming angry because they will not buy them the latest phone or video game.

We are already children of our heavenly Father and have everything that we will ever need, but yet we still listen to the voice of discontentment as if God's provision is not sufficient and the world's gifts are greater than God's. Where is our contentment? Where is our gratitude? Where is our submission that should be fueled by the grace of God that has already done more than we could ever ask or imagine?

Gratitude focuses on the needs that God has faithfully met in our lives. It pushes back against the forgetfulness of His blessings and the beckoning of the world to fleshly desires.

Now that we have looked at the biblical importance of gratitude, how do we transfer these truths from our minds to our hearts? We remember the gospel. We pray for a thankful heart. By faith we discipline ourselves to be more thankful, trusting that God will use our active obedience to become a way of life and a condition of our hearts. We join with our children, regularly thanking God for His blessings. We take time to reflect and even journal on what God has done for us and how He is providing for us in the

present. We become aware of the needs of the less fortunate. We give to others in need. We nurture the complementary spiritual characteristics of contentment, generosity and humility.

In closing, allow these following verses to minister to you as we each seek the beauty of a thankful heart:

- *“Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”* Ps. 100:4-5.
- *“Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.”* Col. 2:7.
- *“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.”* Col. 3:15.
- *“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.”* Ps. 103:1-5.
- *“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* 1 Thess. 5:18.
- *“Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”* 2 Cor. 9:15.
- *“Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!”* Ps. 107:1.