

Grateful: 3. Cultivating Gratitude

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Philippians 4:6-7; Colossians 3:15

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In the early days of this pandemic I had to remember two important things. First, when you look for things to be grateful for, you find them. Second, once you start looking, you discover that gratitude begets more gratitude. I learned this lesson from a couple of rocks. Let me explain. In April, as the pandemic set in, my husband, Jerry and I decided that, as long as the weather cooperated, we would ride our bikes every day. On those rides, we started seeing painted rocks along our biking paths. In one neighborhood in particular, I noticed these neat, happy, little rocks sitting on the ledge of park sign each time we went by. Since there were always different rocks, I figured the painter wanted people to take one. So the next time we rode by, I picked one up, tucked it in my backpack and left it on the patio table where Jerry and I stopped for coffee that morning. A few days later, another crop of beautiful rocks! So I stopped and took another one and left it on a park bench with hopes that it would brighten someone else's day. On my ride home that day, I thought, "I should thank the painter of these rocks." That night, I wrote a short thank you note and signed it, "Your Neighbors on Bikes," and tucked it in my backpack. The next time we rode past that sign, instead of taking a rock, I left my note and thought that was that. But a few days later, as we rode by again, I saw two painted rocks with the message, "Neighbors on Bikes, you Rock." The painter of the rocks had left us a thank you for our thank you. Gratitude begets gratitude.

We are in week three of our series we're calling, *Grateful, the Power of Giving Thanks*. Here's a quick recap. In week one, we looked at the physical, emotional and spiritual benefits of giving thanks. Last week, we looked at what happens when life gets difficult and how we are to give thanks IN all situations, having the ability to recognize how God is present with us. Today, we're going to talk about how to cultivate gratitude.

Cultivate is an agricultural term that has the goal of producing a harvest. So how do we cultivate gratitude in our lives? In her book, *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass says our emotional lives are like a garden and our experiences in life are like the soil in which our feelings grow. If left unattended, certain emotions can choke out others, like the weeds in a garden. There is really nothing inherently wrong with weeds but left unattended they take over and allow nothing else to grow. It's the same with our emotional lives. This same soil allows both weeds and desirable plants to grow and it takes a watchful gardener, and a lot of practice, to recognize the difference between what is fruitful and what will inhibit the growth of goodness. But if the work is done, the garden flourishes, and that is where gratitude grows.

While gratitude is an emotion it is also more than that. It is a disposition that has to be chosen and cultivated. This means having an outlook towards life that manifests itself in actions. It's an ethic. By that I mean it is a framework for principles by which we live more fully in this world. It's embracing a lifestyle that exudes Emmanuel, God with us. This involves establishing deep practices of gratitude that can change us and this world for the better. Gratitude involves not only what we feel but also what we do. Today I am going to share with you some specific practices that, if they can become habits (our normal way of engaging in the world) they can shape us into grateful people and change the world.

In 2012, there was a study done by the John Templeton Foundation that focused on gratitude. They wanted to know how much Americans think about gratitude, how much we practice gratitude, who we are thankful for and who we are most likely to express gratitude towards.

They surveyed 2,000 people and their results provide an unprecedented snapshot of gratefulness across different ages, genders, socio-economic groups, races and religious denominations. They concluded that Americans think gratitude is important, we're just not very good at expressing it. They called this the Gratitude Gap. It's the difference between what we believe about gratitude, knowing that we should say thank you, and how frequently we do it. They found that over half of us do not regularly express gratitude even though almost all of us agree that it is important. This creates a gap between what we believe and what we are practicing. A question to ask yourself today is, "Do I have a gratitude gap in my life?"

This survey also identified the group of people who are least likely to be thanked and that is bosses. Despite wishing to be thanked more often at work ourselves, we don't always think of expressing our gratitude to our bosses. These are challenging days to be leading -- through the pandemic, racial injustice, economic unrest and the deep division we are experiencing in this country. Being a boss is extremely challenging right now. This could be your boss at your place of employment or a government official. It could be the president of your neighborhood association or one of the school officials who are having to make hard, unpopular decisions right now. A word of gratitude will go a long way right now.

There are a long list of other thankless jobs, people who are not likely to be stopped and thanked for the really hard, important job they are doing. In addition to bosses, IRS agents, trash collectors and TSA screener at the airport are on the top of that list. Maybe you can think of others. One of the most thankless jobs I ever had, which was also the most rewarding job I ever had, was being the mother of a teenager. I have three kind and generous adult children now but some of those teenage years were tough. Sometimes, being a parent of a teenager felt like a thankless job. If you are raising a teenager right now, or you've raised a teenager, or you are a teenager, maybe you know what I am talking about.

Over the years, Messiah Church has cultivated gratitude by writing notes to the teachers and staff at Oakwood School and the public servants in the Plymouth Police Department. Have you ever wondered how these folks feel when they receive one of these notes? Do you think they felt better or worse? If you've written a note like this, how do you feel when you are writing it? I'd guess better too. Writing thank you notes is so simple and yet it makes everyone feel better because when you are writing a thank you note you're not thinking about how hard your life is or how badly someone has hurt you. You're thinking about the people who have blessed you. Expressing our gratitude unshackles us from our toxic emotions. Taking time to write a note of thanks can actually change your heart.

Another practice and one of the simplest, most fundamental ways that we cultivate gratitude is through worship. When we gather together (even virtually like this) it is to say "thank you" to God. We're not here to be entertained or watch a show on our device, it is simply and solely to express our gratitude to God for God's good and perfect gifts.

Gratitude is also cultivated through pray. If you are someone who doesn't pray because you don't know how to start or what to say, try writing a thank you note to God. Or if you are some who keeps a gratitude journal, try reading what you have written to God as a way to start a conversation. The apostle Paul says this about prayer: *Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.*

Paul didn't write these words of advice from some ivory tower, sheltered from all trouble or conflict. He was in prison when he wrote them. He knew first-hand what it meant to "give thanks in every situation." When we bring the things that cause us stress into prayer, we put ourselves and our troubles inside a much bigger picture: the story of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. And that leads to thanksgiving and helps us remember to look at life's big picture more than the unpleasant little details. So worship and prayer are ways that we cultivate gratitude.

Gratitude and generosity go hand in hand. When we are grateful, we are not thinking about what we don't have. Joy is found in what we do have. In Genesis 12, God said to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." This is saying, you are blessed to be a blessing. You are expected to look at what you have and then bless other people.

Here's an example of that. Just last month, you, the people of Messiah Church packed 90 Christmas shoeboxes with gifts like toys, warm mittens, hats and books and we sent to the children on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Pine Ridge is the poorest reservation in the United States. Unemployment runs between 80-90% and many of the families have no electricity, telephone, running water, or sewage systems. You looked at what you had and then you blessed others. That's gratitude. It is something you do rather than just something you feel. Generosity is another way to cultivate gratitude.

In Matthew 5, standing on a hillside in Galilee, just above the crowds, Jesus uttered The Beatitudes for the first time. These were blessings addressed to a most unlikely list of people. He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn, the meek and the merciful, those who hunger and thirst, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." In the world in which the Beatitudes were first preached, people believed that Caesar was the only one worthy of honor and that all blessings flowed through him. The richer and more powerful you were, the more valor and virtue you possessed. So when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he overturned the politics of blessings. He was saying that blessings are more than happiness. They are a social vision. God gives gifts to everyone, but especially the vulnerable and those at the bottom of society. Jesus was looking out for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. He was saying, 'blessed are all of you who are disrespected by the powerful, for you are God's beloved community.'" He was blessing those who were most often overlooked by this world. No wonder people all those years ago listened. No wonder they remembered and wrote down his words. No wonder this is still so powerful 2,000 years later. Blessings lift others up-the "other" that this world often overlooks with the goal, or the harvest, of a blessed community.

Are you up for some homework for this week? Ask yourself, who are the people you need to give thanks to? Who are the people with thankless jobs that you can bless with a word of thanks? My hope is that you will take one or two of these ideas and make them practices in your daily life that, over time will cultivate habits, so that gratitude become the rhythm of your life. Gratitude for the gifts that God has given you.

Let's pray: Lord, we are grateful and we apologize because we seldom express it. Every day, every 24 hours, is a gift from you. All of the people in our lives who care for us and serve us, those we never stop to say thank you to, are a gift to us. Help us look for those who have thankless jobs and bless them with a word of gratitude. Help us to send notes of thanks for make phone calls to those people who have impacted our lives in positive ways. Most of all, O Lord, help us to express our gratitude to you. Shape our hearts that we may be grateful people. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 15, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Thanks be to you, O God, for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and for everything he taught us, for the humble path he showed us. We sit at your feet, O Lord. Lead us in the ways of your truth. Teach us how to be your blessed community. Amen.

Monday, November 16

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Philippians 4:6-7

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Observation: The apostle Paul did not write this counsel from some abstract ivory tower, sheltered from all trouble or conflict. He was in prison when he wrote Philippians (see Philippians 1:13). When some "super apostles" scorned his ministry in Corinth, he sent the Corinthian Christians a vivid portrait of his challenging path of service (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). He knew well what it meant to "give thanks in every situation."

Application: Artists and photographers know that often how we frame a picture alters what we focus on in that picture. Paul urged a kind of framing in Philippians 4. When we bring the things that cause us stress into prayer, we put ourselves and our troubles inside a much bigger picture: the story of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. And that leads to thanksgiving. What helps you remember to look at life's big picture more than the unpleasant little details?

Prayer: Lord, the Psalmist wrote, "I keep your word close, in my heart" (Psalm 119:11). I ask for your help as I, too, seek to keep your teaching close in my memory and my heart. Amen.

Tuesday, November 17

Scripture: Psalm 65:6-13

You establish the mountains by your strength; you are dressed in raw power. You calm the roaring seas; calm the roaring waves, calm the noise of the nations. Those who dwell on the far edges stand in awe of your acts. You make the gateways of morning and evening sing for joy. You visit the earth and make it abundant, enriching it greatly by God's stream, full of water. You provide people with grain because that is what you've decided. Drenching the earth's furrows, leveling its ridges, you soften it with rain showers; you bless its growth. You crown the year with your goodness; your paths overflow with rich food. Even the desert pastures drip with it, and the hills are dressed in pure joy. The meadowlands are covered with flocks, the valleys decked out in grain—they shout for joy; they break out in song!

Observation: In the Psalms, we find a wide range of reasons for gratitude and praise. Psalm 65 directed the attention of those who sang or read it to the life-sustaining wonders of our world. The psalmist saw the rain that allows the fertile soil to bring forth nourishing crops, the crops and flocks and harvests that "crown the year," as evidence of God's sustaining love, for which we often have reason to give thanks.

Application: Psalm 65 compares the noise of the nations with the turmoil of the roaring seas. The daily news bombards us with that deafening reality. How might we cut through the noise and recall all that God does for us? What if we were to be still and recognize the wonder of the world around us in a magnificent sunrise, the beauty of a fresh snowfall, or each of God's unique creatures?

Prayer: O God, as I look at the wonderful world you created, with all its beauty and fruitfulness, help me to join in shouting to you with joy and gratitude. Amen.

Wednesday, November 18

Scripture: Psalm 95:1-7

Come, let's sing out loud to the LORD! Let's raise a joyful shout to the rock of our salvation! Let's come before him with thanks! Let's shout songs of joy to him! The LORD is a great God, the great king over all other gods. The earth's depths are in his hands; the mountain heights belong to him; the sea, which he made, is his along with the dry ground, which his own hands formed. Come, let's worship and bow down! Let's kneel before the LORD, our maker! He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep in his hands. If only you would listen to his voice right now!

Observation: Israel developed and refined their understanding of the one God they worshiped over time. At certain points, they adapted language from the cultures around them, as in verse 3 of today's reading. They tended to refer to all supernatural beings, who the New Testament and most Christians call "angels," as "gods." But God was the great person they worshiped and thanked, the great king over all other gods.

Application: Verse 7 (*we are the people of his pasture, the sheep in his hands*) echoes other psalms (including Psalm 23) in identifying us as sheep for whom God cares as a shepherd. The image may have been clearer to rural Israelites than to modern city dwellers. Sheep are utterly dependent on their shepherd to keep them fed, watered and safe. Left to their own devices, they tend to be helpless to ensure their own survival. How grateful are you that in a big, complex universe you are one of God's sheep, watched over with caring and love?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for promising to be the "good shepherd" who cares for me, who doesn't run away in the face of trouble but is always there. I gratefully worship and praise you. Amen.

Thursday, November 19

Scripture: Psalm 96:1-2

Sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD! Bless his name! Share the news of his saving work every single day!

Observation: If we associate expressing gratitude to God only with worship, we might think that gratitude is a once-a-week experience. Psalm 96 anticipated much of the modern research on gratitude that we've reviewed during this series, as the psalmist invited us to express gratitude for God's saving work every single day. The apostle Paul similarly urged Colossian Christians to "overflow with thanksgiving" and "be thankful people" (Colossians 2:7, 3:12-17).

Application: Some of us are musically gifted, and we like the idea of "sing to the Lord a new song." Others, of course, tend to wait in silence through the singing parts of worship, whether

traditional or contemporary. Regardless of our musical aptitude or tastes, what is the heart attitude expressed by the poetic imagery of singing to the Lord a new song? How can all of us join in that spiritual experience?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, many more of us sing in the car or the shower than we do in public. Help my heart to overflow with inner songs of gratitude to you, no matter what kind of singing voice I have. Amen.

Friday, November 20

Scripture: Psalm 103:1-5

Let my whole being bless the LORD! Let everything inside me bless his holy name! Let my whole being bless the LORD and never forget all his good deeds: how God forgives all your sins, heals all your sickness, saves your life from the pit, crowns you with faithful love and compassion, and satisfies you with plenty of good things so that your youth is made fresh like an eagle's.

Observation: Sometimes even without a conscious intention (perhaps influenced by what we hear others saying), we use words like earned, deserved, produced, accomplished and achieved. There is nothing wrong with being conscientious workers, of course. But when the psalmist said, "Let my whole being bless the Lord," it was not because of a belief that God should be grateful for what he had done, but because of gratitude for what God had done for him.

Application: Verses 3-4 strongly suggest that the psalmist had been through a hard time, perhaps a severe illness from which he could not deliver himself. What reasons for gratitude and praise has God helped you find in the wake of your painful experiences? How can you grieve life's tragedies, personal or communal, and yet stay open to God's healing Spirit and God's pledge of a future free of terrible tragedies?

Prayer: O God, grow my comfort and enjoyment of language that recognizes you, and not my own merits, as the ultimate source of so much of the good in my life. Thank you for your many gifts to me. Amen.

Saturday, November 21

Scripture: Revelation 7:9-12

After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice: "Victory belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell face down before the throne and worshipped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always. Amen."

Observation: A prisoner of conscience wrote the book of Revelation (some scholars suggest this was John). The Romans exiled him for his faith on the small Mediterranean island of Patmos, isolated from the Christian churches he led and loved (Revelation 1:9). Yet he produced (and somehow sent from the island) a work of awesome vision and praise. At its heart was the scene of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" in the courts of heaven praising Jesus as the self-giving, saving Lamb of God.

Gratitude isn't limited to this life or this world, Revelation said. Gratitude to our God and Savior is the vocabulary of eternity.

Application: Jesus called his followers to have the same positive impact on our world as light in a dark place, or salt on flavorless food (Matthew 5:13-16). In what ways is your life brighter (not flawless, but brighter!) because of God's love, forgiveness and presence with you? In what ways does the promise of an eternity of praise and gratitude shine into your life, your heart from day to day? How can you reflect the light of God's eternity in ways that brighten the lives of others, and add zest and joy to their world? Ask God to direct you to at least one person for whom you can be God's gratitude-inspiring presence in this holiday season.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I offer blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might to you forever and always. (And when I don't, please remind me.) Amen.