Several years ago I needed to replace the shingles on my roof. My house was built by the students at Spaulding HS as part of their vocational learning – by the way, one of those students was Mark Gropleau who later built this worship area. He did admit to me that he goofed off most of the time at my house since he already knew many building techniques from his Dad. God has been very gracious to Leisa and I so our original shingles lasted more than 30 years. So when the time came to have them replaced, I really didn’t know what to do – my MD had gotten bad enough I couldn’t get on the roof so doing it myself wasn’t an option and I didn’t have much experience with the local roofing contractors. So I called the names of local companies I had heard of and also Ed whose name I found on the internet. Ed answered first, his price was reasonable, I always like to work local and when I checked out some the homes he had done, they looked great and people were happy with the work. So I signed on the ‘dotted line’.

Then I got to know Ed – Ed is really fun to talk with and he has lots of stories & lots of opinions. You do a lot of listening when you are with Ed. But what impressed me most about him is the thankfulness he regularly expresses to his wife. Ed has a routine – he goes out to work all day, comes home around 4 pm. He takes a shower and puts on clean clothes for his wife. They eat together and then he goes out and does an estimate for future work. Everyday Ed thanks his wife strongly for dinner and for her part in allowing him to do this roofing work. And if you have ever talked a lot to Ed you know it is not a simple or quick “thanks”, but one with lots of explanation, intensity and heart-felt appreciation. And I thought, “Wow. Here is an ordinary person doing something extraordinary. And it is something anyone can do but we don’t – especially not with that passion.” Every time I hear about couples fighting, I am reminded about Ed and wonder how their fights might be a bit different with all that thankfulness regularly present.

Our passage today is going to encourage us of the incredible value of thankfulness – especially our continual thankfulness TO God FOR other people. Notice three key phrases in v 3 – “always thank”, “thank God” and “for you”! READ v 3. Today God is challenging each of us to increase something valuable in our lives whether we are discouraged, grieving, or frustrated, OR we are relaxed, encouraged or achieving. It is incredibly spiritually healthy to regularly thank God for other people.

PROPOSITION: It is spiritually healthy to regularly thank God for other people.

I. Always giving thanks ...

READ v 3. Our first key phrase is “always thank” – that is regularly & continually express gratitude and appreciation for something. Some of your translations have the “always” applying to the word “pray”. This is NOT a textual difference but an interpretational one since the word “always” can apply to either “thank” or “prayer”. I am not going to go into that as it makes little difference in what we are being challenged in.
We have all heard the importance of being thankful so sometimes the concept becomes so common we aren’t really being challenged to grow in it effectively. So let’s break down the simple phrase “always giving thanks.” Paul didn’t go off to a monastery to literally pray all the time and do nothing else, so when we say either “always pray” or “always thank” it means we regularly do it, not that we do it exclusively. Whenever Paul prayed for the Colossian church, which he didn’t start and never had visited, he intentionally, rather than haphazardly, thanked God for them.

A. Recognize good

True thankfulness always starts with recognizing something “good” around us. According to the dictionary, “thanks” is an “acknowledgment of a benefit, favor, or the like”. If we define “thanks” as the feeling of being thankful, then we will greatly limit the role God wants thanksgiving to have in our lives. We will live by feelings rather than by faith which will certainly make your life an out-of-control roller coaster! Whenever your feelings go up, they are going to come down! You will become a slave to your feelings which rarely ends up positive.

So it is important to realize that “recognizing good” around us – especially God’s good – can be tough at times. Because we live in a broken world with death, deception, enemies and sin, our pain can often block out our recognition of what God is doing positively in our lives. Our own faulty expectations can make us miss the good we already have. And our deep down self-focus of sin can make us totally miss the abundant blessings of God in the midst of our troubles and trials.

Interestingly we also easily begin to take for granted things we should be thankful for. We see this a lot in others and rarely recognize it when it happens in us. Someone helps us or gives us a gift or takes time with us or... There is a natural gratefulness that comes out. As we keep helping those thanks get less and less. Then it turns to complaining – you aren’t doing enough, you aren’t. Entitlement sets in.

B. Express the appreciation

A second key element of any thanksgiving is to regularly express that appreciation. It is not enough to have a fleeting thought or emotion of thankfulness, but it is important that we express that appreciation. If you live in this state long enough, you will run into a quiet old time Vermonter – usually male – who thinks, “I told my wife ‘I love you’ when we got married, isn’t that enough?” Expressing our appreciation makes our own perspective of life more accurate and real – which is one of the reasons God calls us to regularly praise and worship Him. He is not an egoist that needs affirmation, but we need it since sin and destructive self-focus grow in us when our appreciation of what God is doing lessens.

Our appreciation of what God does for, through and in us constantly, gets corrupted over time without us even recognizing it. The progression is simple. We recognize something God has done and at first we are very grateful. Then after some time that
gratefulness turns to anticipation – we look forward to God doing it again. Then that anticipation begins to turn to expectation – we expect God to do this for us. Then that expectation begins to turn to entitlement and we get mad at God or others because they don’t give us what we want, when we want and how we want. And we never see the subtle, slow over-time change from thankfulness to entitlement – from seeing God as our Almighty, loving Father to seeing him as our servant, vending machine or non-intrusive butler.

This transformation is so common around us, I’ll bet everyone in this room has someone in your life who is taking you for granted.

- I’ve helped out my friend at school a number of times, and now they have turned on me.
- I slave away for my kids at home and they just complain.
- My parents just complain all the time about what I do wrong and never see the places I am trying
- My spouse used to be so thankful for what I did and now they just want, want, want.
- or I gave them everything but all they want to do is lay around playing video games.

Check it out – appreciation turns to anticipation, anticipation turns to expectation and expectation turns to entitlement.

C. Make thanksgiving a habit (often & regular)

I took extra time on this to help us to recognize the power of God’s commands in the area of thankfulness. 1 Thes 5:18 “give thanks in all circumstances for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Since we aren’t going to naturally FEEL thankful for all circumstances, this is a command for us to put intentional effort into recognizing good in the midst of terrible times and continually making a habit of expressing our thanksgiving. It is spiritually healthy to regularly give thanks

II. To God...

It is spiritually healthy to regularly give thanks ... that is absolutely true, but if we stop there, we will miss much of the transforming power of this regular practice of gratitude that the early Christians knew. READ v 3. Did you notice WHO they were to regularly thank? God! Our second key phrase is “thank God”. So this “always thank” is not just meant to be a feeling or a response to what others do for us – but there is something far more profound about this thanksgiving.

A. As Father of Jesus

God is the one to whom Paul offered his prayerful thanks. So the “thanks” we are talking about here is not primarily speaking about writing thank you notes for presents, being grateful when someone helps us or appreciating those who serve.
Notice first how God – the God we are thanking – is described. “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Did you notice anything different about that? Normally when Paul refers to God as “Father”, he refers to God as our Father – the father of all faithful Christians. In fact, that is what was just written at the end of v 2, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father” – God is the spiritual Father of Paul, Timothy, all the Colossian believers and all believers in Jesus since then. What an awesome privilege it is every time we pray “Father”. God has adopted us as His children through no merit of our own! Now Paul adds that God is also “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Since Paul normally directs his thanks to BOTH God the Father and Jesus Christ AND because Paul has also already referred to God as the Father of Christian believers – this description is probably deliberate and significant. I’m sure the false teachers in the church there did not believe in the Trinity – One God, in three persons, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. I’m sure much of their false teaching would fall apart with a right understanding of God’s nature as Trinity – like we see in Jehovah Witness false beliefs about Jesus today.

B. Childish or child-like response

A quick side note: How can we tell if we are rightly viewing God as our heavenly Father and not as our divine butler, vending machine or servant? We can tell by our response to God’s answers to our prayers when they are not as we expected. When problems don’t instantly disappear, pain doesn’t instantly leave, bills aren’t instantly paid or a person is still attacking us do we throw a fit, get mad at God or tell others they aren’t doing enough for us? That is a childish response to God as Father – it is no different than a temper tantrum by a 2 year old. But if we relook at the situation and believe that God will bring a greater good out of the bad situation by us going through it, then seek to keep going in the power of Jesus, that is a child-like response that reflects real faith. End of the side-note, let’s get back to what is so incredible about giving thanks to God for what another person is doing which isn’t directly for us and who we don’t personally know! READ v 3.

C. Who is behind all (providence)

Why should we thank God for what another person is doing? Why not just thank the other person? Because in thanking God, we are recognizing the bigger work of God behind everything! We will then be encouraged to see life more deeply and more genuinely. The fancy word for this is “providence” – the providence of God. Now the word “providence” can sound mysterious, but it comes from a word you know very well - the word “provide”. “Provide” simply means “to supply what is needed; to give sustenance or support.” So the noun “providence” has come to mean the act of “providing for or sustaining and governing the universe by God.”

Remember how we mentioned how easy it is for us to lose that sense of gratitude when we regularly receive something from God or another? Appreciation turns to anticipation, anticipation turns to expectation and expectation turns to entitlement without us even knowing it. How much easier it is for us to forget how much God is
doing behind the scenes to maintain this universe, our planet, and life itself. I don’t regularly thank God for oxygen, the carbon dioxide cleansing and changing sunlight into produce that plants do. I take it for granted until there is not enough oxygen, too much carbon dioxide or not enough food! When we regularly thank God for His providence – His providing through others and through the design of nature and through the Bible, we can grow deeper in our appreciation of God’s providence – His providing in more ways than we can comprehend.

Many of you have seen an incredible transformation in me physically this past year. At this time last year, I was in a wheelchair because of my muscular dystrophy and had trouble putting my own shirt on. Over the past 45 years, I had been declining physically, so in faith I had come to accept the constant weakening of my muscles. I simply wanted to serve and honor Jesus in my weakness. But then God has given me about 11 years worth of strength back in my life since last summer. Was it a miracle? Yes and no. I wasn’t instantly & miraculously healed, but what God sovereignly did behind the scenes is even greater. Why did a geneticist at Ohio State keep working to find our family’s genetic defect when they already thought they had found it? How did our family’s different MD doctors meet & even know to discuss our family’s need at a break at a doctor’s conference? How did a scientist in the ‘90s find a mouse with my slow channel congenital myasthenia syndrome and then test it against the genetic drugs of the day when so few people have it? I won’t know the answers to those questions or thousands of others until heaven, but I know God had a hand in all of it. God is the only one who can always bring good out of bad for Jesus’ followers. God is the only one who can use even satan for His purposes. God is always actively at work around us and as Christ followers, He is our heavenly Father, who is guiding us to a deeper and richer future for eternity than we could ever imagine. I am coming to recognize that God’s providence “behind the scenes” is even greater than the biggest instantaneous miracle we will see in our lifetime! So it is spiritually healthy to regularly thank GOD.

III. For others “for you”

It is spiritually healthy to regularly thank God … that is absolutely true, but if we stop there, we will miss another piece of this transforming power of thanksgiving that God is revealing to us here. READ v 3. “For you” is our last phrase.

A. Didn’t personally know so wasn’t personally receiving

Paul is regularly praying for the Colossians Christians and the local church they are a part of. He is concerned for them, wants God to bless them, mold them, use them and transform their character to be more & more like Jesus Christ. But Paul didn’t personally start the church there nor does he even know them personally. So in this case, Paul’s thanksgiving to God is NOT about what he, Paul, has personally received or people he personally knows. Wow – that means this picture of thanksgiving which is so transformational goes way beyond us and what we get.
That is certainly stretching isn’t it! God is regularly calling us to intentionally expand our focus of thankfulness beyond when we feel thankful. God is regularly calling us to intentionally expand our focus of thanksgiving beyond what we immediately see. And God is regularly calling us to intentionally expand our focus of thanksgiving beyond who we personally know. Yet this past week didn’t many of us personally experienced something similar when we thanked God for the rescue of the soccer team and their coach from being trapped deep in a cave in Thailand. None of us know them, we’ve never met them and we don’t received anything from them.

B. Progress in God’s work (not what we personally receive)

So what are we thanking God for? For other people! How powerful it is when we recognize God’s role in our lives and other people’s roles in our lives. And we’ll see the specifics of what he appreciated in the Colossians in 4 weeks.

But since Paul didn’t personally know the Colossians personally and has not directly receiving anything from them, his thankfulness goes way beyond anything he personally received. That is another stretching point because Paul is thanking God for others – in what God is doing in their lives and how they are serving Jesus! This thanksgiving is about progress in God’s work in this world, minus anything about himself! The Colossians are helping God’s greater work and they are responding faithfully to the Holy Spirit work in their lives.

Boy does that help break our sinful self-focus and break the entitlement cycle (appreciation turns to anticipation, anticipation turns to expectation and expectation turns to entitlement). It helps us see God’s providence more as we see what He is doing in other people’s lives. And it helps us see ourselves as part of God’s bigger plan rather than thinking we are at the center of the universe: God is always at work around us – the transformation in people’s lives and the preparation for heaven is more than we can imagine. We get to join God in His work of the defeat of evil spiritual forces and the renewing of all. There is no such thing as a “Christian nobody” even though more Christians will be seen as “nobodies” by the world than people in other groups! We have so much to be thankful for – and when our thankfulness goes beyond what we personally get, or are trying to get, then God unleashes even more benefits for eternity!

C. Part of a bigger plan

So a simple conclusion this week: It is spiritually healthy to regularly thank God for other people especially people we have never received anything from.

- Continue to develop regular times of thanksgiving in your life.
- Take time regularly to thank God for things that are happening around you because He is behind the positive transformation of everything
- and be thankful for others – especially those who you have never met but who are serving Jesus and allowing Him to transform their thoughts and lives.

Keep overcoming in the power of Jesus!