

GRATITUDE

ABOUNDING IN THANKSGIVING

Ben Kreps

Lead Pastor, Living Hope Church (Middletown, PA)

Many of us have gone through the same familiar and very disappointing experience. You start up the car and the dreaded “check-engine” light flickers to life on your dashboard. What could it be? A sensor gone bad? The onset of total engine failure and impending financial ruin? Whatever the cause, we are wise to head to the mechanic and have an expert run a diagnostic test to discern the nature of the problem.

When it comes to the condition of our hearts, we should perceive a warning light that flashes bright red whenever gratitude gives way to grumbling and complaining in our lives. Here’s why: gratitude is an essential indicator of how well we apprehend the grace and goodness of God. When gratitude is absent, we must get to the bottom of it.

Maybe it’s time for a simple check-up or maybe an opportunity for a major overhaul. Whatever the case, let’s allow our hearts to be diagnosed and addressed by the one who knows our hearts better than we do. Let’s consider what God’s Word says about gratitude and how we can increasingly be shaped to experience and express daily the gratitude and thanksgiving that is his due.

God’s Word on Gratitude

It is fitting and appropriate to give thanks to God, for “he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25), and “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (Jas. 1:17). We are called to recognize that everything we have is a gift from God and therefore our gratitude is to be directed toward God. Furthermore, throughout Scripture we find repeated exhortations such as “Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples” (1 Chr. 16:8)! And, “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps. 107:1)!

To be clear, gratitude is not something that only believers experience. Even a hardened atheist can feel grateful in the presence of immense beauty like the Grand Canyon or in the sweet, daily bursts of brilliance as the sun rises and sets. In fact, it is common in our culture to see gratitude as a virtue worth lauding as it brings emotional and physical benefits when cultivated. In the end though, that kind of gratitude is ultimately worthless because a godless gratitude fails to direct our hearts to the one to whom thanksgiving and honor is due.

Tragically, there is a fundamental issue at the heart of fallen men and women—a hardened heart towards God that refuses to express gratitude toward him. The apostle Paul addresses this as he begins his letter to the Romans. In ourselves, we are sinners who stand under the righteous wrath of God and ingratitude is at the core of our rebellion. He writes, “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” (Rom. 1:21).

This should correct any impulse to think of ingratitude as merely a character deficiency, a sort of semi-acceptable sin. A failure to honor and thank God describes those who will experience God’s judgment. Elsewhere in Scripture ingratitude is listed with arrogance, brutality, and self-centered love as particular hallmarks of those who deny the power of God (2 Tim. 3:1–5). Gratitude is serious business! It is serious because failure to give thanks to God is failure to honor and glorify the one who created us and who daily provides for us. That is negligence of the most arrogant sort.

In light of our many sins, including our failure to appropriately live a lifestyle of thanksgiving toward our generous Creator, it is stunning, amazing grace that God’s response to our sin was to send what is most dear to him—his own willing Son. Jesus came to his own and his own did not receive him. He was despised and rejected by those who should have received him with grateful hearts. And yet, he came to save us from our sins, including our ungratefulness. In and through his atoning death as our substitute and through his glorious resurrection, our Savior has defeated sin and death and has opened wide the door to heaven through his body so that formerly ungrateful, ungodly, undeserving sinners like you and me can know the grace, forgiveness, and mercy of God.

In light of this mercy and grace from God, we have endless reasons for profound gratitude in every and any season. In Christ, we may rightly declare, “He has raised my soul from death to life! My sins are washed away! I am an adopted child of God! I have been transferred out the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light! My future is glorious!” How can we not be grateful? And so, understandably, the author of Hebrews writes, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28).

In light of the grace of God in Christ, we are exhorted: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, *abounding in thanksgiving*” (Col. 2:6–7, emphasis mine). “Abounding in thanksgiving” should describe each and every man, woman, and child who has received and understands the immensity of God’s mercy and grace.

Challenges to Gratitude

While gratitude is an appropriate and natural response to the grace of God, our daily experience may fall short of the command given in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” As we navigate our busy and complicated lives, we may, at times, find an

increasing absence of gratitude in the face of real concerns and temptation. In his helpful book *Practicing Thankfulness*, Sam Crabtree writes,

Just as a fire eventually flickers and dies out if untended, gratitude can easily weaken and fade away if ignored in a world of distractions, busyness, and painful troubles. Daily life throws cold water on the smoldering embers of gratefulness in our hearts.²⁵

When we find it difficult to obey an exhortation like “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20), we see once again the dashboard of our hearts light up red. The good news is that we are not stuck! By God’s grace we can rekindle and add fuel to the smoldering embers of our gratitude.

Cultivating Gratitude

Author and pastor C.J. Mahaney asks a probing question to help us discern our hearts when he writes:

What would happen if I crossed your path tomorrow morning? Would I encounter someone who was an alert and thankful observer of answered prayer, someone who in a pronounced way was grateful for God’s many mercies? We also want to continue throughout the day expressing gratefulness for the innumerable manifestations of God’s grace. It’s as if God is placing sticky-notes in our lives everywhere. How alert and perceptive of them are you?²⁶

Don’t you want to be known as someone who is alert and thankful for the innumerable manifestations of God’s mercy and grace that fill our lives each day? If so, let me suggest four ways to cultivate gratitude:

1. Have a conversation with those who know you best.

If we want to cultivate gratitude, we are wise to invite the input of others. Because it is possible to be deceived in our own self-assessment, a humble Christian is wise to invite honest feedback as an opportunity to grow in faithfulness to God. Ask your spouse, your children, or trusted friends, “Do you think I’m a grateful person?” Set aside any defensiveness you may be tempted to feel in the face of criticism and position your mind and heart to listen and consider what those who love you have to say.

I understand that it can be difficult to open ourselves up to potential criticism and correction. But Scripture offers a great promise to those who humble themselves: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6). When we humble ourselves and are willing to deal honestly and openly with our lives, we should have a happy expectation that we will experience fresh grace from God to sanctify and strengthen our hearts for our growth in gratefulness and godliness.

²⁵ Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Thankfulness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2021), 13.

²⁶ C.J. Mahaney, *Humility* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2005), 71.

2. List your benefits.

When the psalmist urges his own soul to bless and praise God in Psalm 103, he begins by listing the benefits that God has given him by his grace.

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. 103:2b-5).

In busyness, distractions, and painful trials we can forget the goodness and generosity of God. We can forget the immeasurable grace and benefits that we experience each day. As a result, we begin to doubt that God is good and faithful. One important way that we do battle against the temptation to think hard thoughts about God is to address our souls and regularly rehearse the bountiful blessings that we have experienced from God. Take some unhurried time to make a list of benefits that you have received from God. Psalm 103 is a good starting point, but a thoughtful list of benefits received will be substantially longer and ever growing as we remember that "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things" (Rom. 8:32)?

Keep your list at the ready for the inevitable difficult seasons you will experience throughout your life so that you will be armed with the truth of God's goodness and faithfulness in order to battle doubt and fear. When our hearts are aware of God's blessing on our lives, we will find reasons to sing and praise God even in the darkness and disillusionment of suffering.

3. Fill your prayers with gratitude.

Consider your prayer life. Are your times in prayer mostly about expressing desire and need or is there a discernible gratitude that saturates your prayer? Dependent prayer that shares our needs and requests to God is vital, but we must not forget that the apostle Paul instructs every believer, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2). In Philippians 4:6 he writes, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

My grandmother, who passed into the presence of Christ several years ago, knew a lot about suffering and loss and yet she was perhaps the most grateful person I have ever known. She had a rare and sweet ability to see God's goodness in the smallest things each day and she could be heard throughout the day thanking God out loud. Her gracious and grateful heart modeled the call held out for us all to give thanksgiving to God forever and ever (Rev. 7:12). As we approach God in prayer, let us cultivate a gracious heart that is attuned to the mercy of God no matter our condition and let us thank God each day for his mercies.

“Whatever You Do...”

Colossians 3:17 exhorts us: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” In both words of gratefulness and deeds of love, let us make it our aim to cultivate an awareness of God’s grace and activity in our lives and those around us—for the health of our hearts, the encouragement of others, and the glory of the one who has generously and bountifully blessed us in every way. Let us give thanks with grateful hearts as we make our way toward our blessed hope in the day of Christ. For on that day we will join the chorus of heaven in the presence of the Lord singing,

“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 7:12). Let’s not wait for that great day to start singing; let’s join in that song today!