

Week 1 - Cultivate Gratitude - Colossians 3:12-17

Scripture Reading: 1Thessalonians 5:12-18

Introduction

This morning, we are starting a mini-series leading us to Thanksgiving on the subject of thanks that I have titled "Thanksgiving Living"

The Bible mentions the topic of thanks a lot

In fact, the word "thanks" is used in our ESV Bible 98 times in 95 different verses in both the Old and New Testaments. In six of those instances we find it used in the exact same phrase, "*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.*"

The word "thanksgiving" is used 35 times in 34 verses and the word "thank" as a verb is found 29 times in 28 verses

In our passage this morning from Colossians there are three mentions of being thankful

We see the command to "be thankful" in verse 15, the condition of "having thankfulness in your hearts" in verse 16, and the command to always be "giving thanks" in verse 17

I could be mistaken - and I challenge you to find out if I am by taking a concordance and looking at all the verses - but I believe that in every instance, the thanks mentioned is thanks directed at God

That certainly is the case in our passage this morning as God is mentioned directly as the object of thanks twice and is strongly implied in the third instance

What we have in the passage we are considering this morning is a description of what a citizen of heaven should look like

I think that's particularly significant as we come to it having recently studied Peter's letter where we saw ourselves as sojourners on this earth looking forward to our heavenly home

And as we read through the list of characteristics, you will no doubt be struck by the stark contrast between this biblical standard and the attitudes and lifestyles of most people today

As we look around, we see more ruthlessness than compassion or kindness; more pride than humility or meekness; and no one would ever accuse us of being patient and accommodating

Instead of forgiving each other, the popular refrain is, "I don't get mad, I get even."

Consequently, we live in a world where people are largely reeling through life without equilibrium

But perhaps nothing is more lacking in our world today than a true spirit of gratitude and thankfulness

And that shouldn't be surprising since, for the most part, people have a wrong heart attitude that prevents them from demonstrating thanks

Also, along with recognizing that there are things for which to be thankful, giving thanks requires someone to whom to express those thanks, and most people don't acknowledge that there is someone to whom they should be thankful

So it should come as no surprise to us that we are surrounded by disillusioned, bitter, selfish, troubled, self-absorbed, and dissatisfied people

Because gratitude and thankfulness is foundational to our well-being

We could spend a great deal of time working our way through each of the characteristics found in these verses from Colossians 3 but I want to focus our attention on verses 15-17 where we see thanks mentioned three times

Follow along as I read through the passage in its entirety [**Colossians 3:12-17**]

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 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.

The first thing we will see today is that:

I. Gratitude leads to thanksgiving

As I said before, we have three mentions of “thanks” in three different forms

In verse 15 we see the English word “thankful” in the command “*be thankful*”

In verse 16 we see the English word “thankfulness” as Paul describes the preferred condition of the heart as being “*with thankfulness*”

And in verse 17 we see the English word “thanks” in the command to continually be “*giving thanks*”

What we could easily miss is the fact that Paul indicates that there is an attitude that leads to an action

It's a bit subtle but being “thankful” and having “thankfulness” are attitudes of the heart and “giving thanks” is an action that springs from that attitude

Gratitude therefore is an attitude that we must have

The definition of **gratitude** according to our trusty Webster's 1913 dictionary is “the state of being grateful”

And it's in the definition of grateful that we come to see why there is so little gratitude in the world

According to Webster, **grateful** means “having a due sense of benefits received” and to be “kindly disposed toward one from whom favor has been received”

Ingratitude or thanklessness is rampant because people fail to acknowledge their indebtedness

It's the failure to acknowledge the receipt of a gift and the giver of that gift

The Lord's brother, James, writes in **James 1:17** that

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...”

So not only is ingratitude rude and disrespectful, it is also sin because it fails to acknowledge God

And it's a sin that plays a significant role in the decline of morality

In Romans 1, the apostle Paul describes the unrighteous in our world and in verse 21 [**Romans 1:21**] he reveals a major cause for that unrighteousness saying:

*For although they knew God, **they did not honor him as God** or give thanks to him and their foolish hearts were darkened*

In other words, they didn't acknowledge God so as to be grateful for his favor extended toward them

Then in verse 28 [**Romans 1:28**] he says:

Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done

Being ungrateful leads us into a downward spiral

Like Peter who walked on the water until he took his eyes off of the Lord, when we fail to acknowledge God and his good gifts to us we can't help but sink into further ingratitude and despair

There are many causes for having a heart attitude of ingratitude but chief among them is **pride**

We want to do things for ourselves and it pains us to have to acknowledge that we are indebted to someone else

Paul writes in **2Timothy 3:2** - that people will become lovers of self and that one of the characteristics of self-love is being ungrateful

We also like to think we are in charge and accountable to no one

To do that we have to believe that we are the makers of our destinies and the source of all our blessings

We see this attitude, once again from the pen of Paul, in **1Corinthians 4:7** where he writes about those who boast about the things they had received as if they had not received them

While we don't have time to list all the reasons for our ingratitude, I do want to mention one more really big one

And that is our expectations of what we deserve

I think we see this from the very beginning of creation

Consider the account of Adam and Eve who God created and gave a perfect place in which to dwell

They had everything and yet all it took was Satan in the form of the serpent to come and whisper in Eve's ear that God was holding out on them

That there was more that they could enjoy and they became ungrateful and threw it all away as they grasped for what they thought they deserved

Then look at how God delivered the Children of Israel out of Egypt after 400 years of enslavement there

God not only miraculously set them free but caused the Egyptians to lavish goods upon them as they left

Then, God offered them a land flowing with milk and honey but there was a catch - they would have to fight for it

And the Children of Israel grumbled against God and wished they were back in Egypt leading God to punish the adult generation by making them wander for forty-years until they had all passed away

Then, in Luke 17 we see the account of Jesus healing ten men who were afflicted with leprosy

You're probably familiar with the account and how they all stood calling out to Jesus for healing

And he told them to exercise faith by going to the priests to present themselves for inspection according to the law before they were actually healed - and in doing so all ten were healed

But only one, and that one was a Samaritan at that, came back to thank Jesus for healing him

I don't doubt that the other nine were happy for having been healed but they weren't "grateful"

Gratitude is more than good feelings; it's good feelings directed toward a benefactor and the nine lacked "a proper sense of benefits received" and the proper feelings toward Jesus who had benefited them

Who knows, maybe they convinced themselves they never should have gotten leprosy in the first place or that they should have been healed sooner or that they shouldn't have had to ask for healing

But with all these examples - which are just a sampling - it's really hard to say that we, as people, don't have a problem with a sense of entitlement and gratitude

On March 30, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln appointed a national day of fasting to be held one month hence

In his proclamation, President Lincoln included the following indictment:

And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land,

may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

And then he offered this potential corrective as the reasoning behind the national day of fasting:

It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

As we so often see, we really haven't changed all that much with the passage of time - have we?

We have a problem when it comes to gratitude

And without gratitude we won't be giving thanks because, as Webster says, thanksgiving is the act of rending thanks for favors or mercies and a public acknowledgement of divine goodness

So if we don't recognize God's goodness we won't be "*giving thanks to God the Father through [Jesus]*"

But there is a corrective and it's found in the fact that:

II. Understanding leads to gratitude

There are several things we need to understand if we are going to have the gratitude that leads to giving thanks

First, we need to understand who God is

Looking back to a phrase that I told you is found six times in the Old Testament we will look at one of those instances

1Chronicles 16:34 tells us:

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

That same phrase is found an additional five times in the Psalms and it reveals several things about who God is

We see that God is good, his love is unwavering, and lasts eternally

Our hearts should swell with gratitude when we recognize that God is not capricious and mean-spirited and that God is faithful even when we are faithless

And even in the midst of our greatest difficulty or deprivation, we know that our God will never abandon or forsake us

In fact, God has promised that very thing as we read in **Hebrews 13:5**

And because of who God is, we can count on that

Second, we need to understand our relationship to God and the gifts that he gives to us

First, we need to recognize that God is the Creator and we are the creatures

We aren't in charge and we cannot command or demand that God do anything

While I have some issues with Rick Warren's best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Mr. Warren was exactly correct in the first sentence of his book when he wrote: "It's not about you."

It's human nature to want to believe that we are the center of the universe, but we aren't - God is

God created us and we exist for his glory

Second, God is sovereign and exercises complete control over all creation

What that means is that everything that happens to us is according to God's will for our lives

Whether those things are by his sovereign will or according to his permissive will, God remains in control of those events and their outcomes

And we have the assurance that God works so that everything that is experienced by one of his true children will ultimately be used for good [**Romans 8:28**]

None of us is exempt from unpleasantness or difficult trials but we can still be grateful that God is in charge and with us through it all

And because that is true, we can do as James says in the beginning of his letter and [**James 1:2**] "*count it all joy when [we] meet various trials*" knowing that God is using those things for his purposes

Simply knowing that the events of our lives are in the hands of our benevolent, all-powerful, good, and loving God should fill us with gratitude

It's that knowledge that allows us to "*give thanks in all circumstances*" as we saw Paul command in our Scripture reading from **1Thessalonians 5:18**

The fact that we are commanded to give thanks indicates that thanksgiving is within our control

Otherwise, it would be meaningless and cruel to tell us to do it

It would be like telling someone 5'3" tall to be 6'4" - it would be absurd

However, the act of giving thanks springs from the attitude of gratitude and there may well be times when we are lacking in gratitude

Thankfully, there are things we can do because:

III. Gratitude can be cultivated

Something we need to recognize is that having a grateful heart in no way denies the realities of life and the fact that there are times in our lives that are painful and circumstances that are less than ideal

We don't have to have a Pollyanna-esque attitude and pretend that everything is perfect when it's not

God knows that we sometimes suffer

In fact, Jesus told his disciples in **John 16:33** that they would have tribulation in this present life before giving them reason for gratitude by telling them "*Take heart; I have overcome the world*"

The reality is that we won't always have hearts that are filled with gratitude but the good news is that there are things we can do to improve our gratitude

The Psalms are full of laments where the psalmists were experiencing difficulties, acknowledged their struggles before God, and wound up praising him

And one big reason they saw their difficulties turn to praise and gratitude was because they took their focus off of themselves and instead focused on God

And in doing so they were reminded of God's goodness, love, presence, and sovereignty and they were filled with gratitude for who God is

Psalm 107 contains a wonderful recitation of people who were in the midst of struggles of various kinds

It speaks of those who were wandering looking for a home, those who were in prison, those who were in trouble because of their own sin, those who faced natural disaster, and those who were just plain low in spirit

And it tells how, in turning to the Lord, they found reason to be grateful

And the Psalm ends with the following [**Psalm 107:43**]

Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord.

Another thing we can do to cultivate gratitude is stop comparing ourselves to others

Discontent often comes into our lives when we look around and see others whom we believe have it better than we do
Social media like Facebook adds to this problem because we tend to forget that people typically post only the brightest moments of their lives

So we wind up comparing our less than perfect lives with their selective imagery

Don't compare yourself to what you see of someone else's life - they just might be delighted to have your situation

Remember, God is sovereign and it's God who gives you what you have so any discontent is ultimately discontent with God and that is to fall into the same trap as Adam and Eve fell into thinking that God is unfair

Instead of focusing on others, make the effort to focus on what you have

We have been conditioned to notice what we don't have more readily than what we have

Like the old hymn says, "Count your blessings; name them one by one; and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."

We overlook so many blessings each and every day and being grateful begins with appreciating every good thing God sends our way and recognizing there is nothing too insignificant to be thankful for

And we can even be thankful for our difficulties knowing that they are also a part of God's will and that he is using those difficulties to mold us to the image of his Son as James writes in **James 1:2-4**

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

You might find it helpful to take time to write down 3-4 things for which you are thankful each day

But don't stop there, actually say thank you for what you have

Truly grateful people not only recognize they have things for which to be thankful; they also recognize they have someone to be thankful to and they take the time and make the effort to say "Thank you"

You will also find that expressing thanks for the things you notice will have the added benefit of making you notice more things to give thanks for

Conclusion

We give thanks out of hearts that are filled with gratitude

Gratitude grows as we recognize our place in the created order and who God is and what he has given to us

We can be prone to arrogance and self-importance believing that what we have is according to our own strength so cultivating a heart of gratitude is beneficial for us

And being grateful leads to giving thanks

The Bible is filled with commands to give thanks to God

We have seen two of those commands in our text this morning

Colossians 3:15 contains perhaps the plainest command of all: *“Be thankful”*

And verse 18 [**Colossians 3:18**] commands *“do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”*

And our Scripture reading from 1Thessalonians contains the command *“give thanks in all circumstances”* [**1Thess 5:18**]

Giving thanks keeps us in a right relationship with God

1Thessalonians 5:12-18 (page 988)

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.