

Gratitude

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Date: 13 March 2016

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Well, welcome again, as I said at the beginning of the service. So glad that we are able to gather here tonight together, and glad that those of you who are here for the first time are visiting.

Glad that you've come. We are at the end. This is the last Sunday of a series that we started a few weeks ago. It's a series that we've done during the season of Lent, which is the season of the church calendar that we're in now.

It's a season where we focus on our need for Jesus and the hope of Easter, which we'll celebrate in just a little while. But here we are in this kind of last night of this series, and it's a series that we've called Habits of Holiness.

And we've been considering the idea that the Christian faith is not merely something that is meant to remain intellectual. It's not just a series of things that we assent to intellectually.

That it's a reality, a way of being, a way of living, that needs to be worked into our lives, worked into the warp and woof of our daily lives.

[1 : 06] It needs to be sort of ground into us. It needs to be the marinade that we steep in. It needs to be something that is lived out again and again and again. That that's how change happens in the Christian life.

And so we've looked at some key areas, some key habits that cultivate this new life. So the first week we looked at the call to submit everything in our lives to God and what that looks like on a daily level.

Then the next week we looked at Scripture and the role that that plays in the lives of people who follow Jesus. The next week we looked at contentment, which is not unrelated to our topic tonight. And then the week after that, last week, we looked at contemplation. You know, one of my favorite images from Dan's sermon last week is the idea of having hearts that are open and hospitable to the Word of God.

And then tonight all of this sort of culminates in our final topic, which is the concept of gratitude, of thankfulness. 1 Thessalonians 5, 16 through 18, Paul is actually listing distinguishing marks of Christians.

[2 : 20] This is a place near the end of his letter where he's saying, these are the things, these are the qualities that should set you apart that make Christians unique in the world. And he lists three of them, and the third is gratitude.

Now what's interesting about that, if you think about that, is it sort of raises the question, how could gratitude be unique to Christians?

I mean, why is that something that Christians have the right to claim as theirs? In our culture right now, gratitude is one of the most popular things going. Everybody loves the idea of gratitude.

We've talked about some controversial things in this church over the years. This is not one of those things. There's nothing controversial about gratitude. And the answer is, when Christians talk about gratitude, we're talking about something unique.

It's actually something that is vastly different from what most people think of when they think of being thankful or cultivating gratitude, because it's rooted in our understanding of who God is and what he's done in the world and what he's done in our lives.

[3 : 30] And it's inseparably linked to that like a tree to its roots. So tonight we're going to compare Christian gratitude, what Paul talks about, what the Bible talks about in the Old and New Testament.

We're going to compare that concept of gratitude with the sort of more prevalent, common cultural understanding of gratitude, which we'll call hashtag gratitude.

And I'm not being snarky. It's just better than saying the common cultural understanding of gratitude in our environment. So Christian gratitude versus hashtag gratitude. And what we're going to see is this.

We're going to see that Christian gratitude is unique for three reasons. It's unique because of the object of our gratitude. That makes it unique. It's unique because of the circumstances of our gratitude, the circumstances in which we give thanks.

And then lastly, it's unique because of the reason, the reason that we are thankful to begin with. So let's pray, ask God to help us, and then we'll get started. Our Father, we thank you for all of this.

[4 : 35] As we were gathered praying, some of us before the service, we were recognizing that this service is in many ways a symphony of gifts that you've given us, gifts that you've given each person to serve or to sing or to set up or to clean or to greet or to all of the various ways.

And also your word says that each man, woman, and child here is himself or herself a gift. And we recognize that at the center of all of these gifts is the gift of your Son.

And we pray that tonight our understanding and our joy in who he is would be magnified, that he would increase, that we might decrease.

And we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So the first thing we're going to talk about is the object of Christian gratitude. As I said a moment ago, gratitude has become deeply embedded.

I mean, that's an understatement. It's become deeply embedded in the bourgeois spirituality of late modern America. Virtually any episode of Oprah, any self-help book, any corner yoga class, you will emerge having been encouraged to cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

[5 : 51] If you look at mainstream publications like Time, the New York Times, Scientific American, they are regularly putting out articles that extol the virtues and the benefits of gratitude in your life.

There was actually an NPR special that aired last, it was around Thanksgiving last year. And it was hosted by Susan Sarandon. And it was a one-hour special on all of the benefits of gratitude.

Maybe you caught this. There are foundations like the John Templeton Foundation, who give millions of dollars to gratitude research.

People like Robert Emmons, who studies what is called the science of gratitude. Right? So it turns out that gratitude not only makes us feel happier, but it can also boost our immune system and lower our blood pressure.

So gratitude has a lot of benefits. It's a good thing. We should be thankful for thankfulness. But here's the thing. There's something in all of this that I think that we need to pay attention to.

[7 : 01] You may have caught the article. It came out in December. It not surprisingly generated a bit of controversial backlash. But it was written by Barbara Ehrenreich.

And she wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times in December. And the title is this. The Selfish Side of Gratitude. Interesting.

Here's a quote. She says, It's good to express our thanks, of course, to those who deserve recognition. And then she sort of says, But let's admit it.

This gratitude is really about you and how you can feel better. So she's noting that most of the focus with what we're calling hashtag gratitude is on the one giving thanks.

So all the benefits that come when we generate feelings of thankfulness. So here's the point that she makes.

[8 : 00] She says, So it's possible to achieve the recommended levels of gratitude without actually interacting with another human being. Without actually interacting with anyone.

Anyone outside yourself. She says, All you have to do is to generate within yourself the good feelings associated with gratitude and then bask in its warm, comforting glow.

If there's any loving involved in this, it is self-love. And the current hoopla around gratitude is a celebration of onanism. You can look that one up later.

Gratitude with no giver in mind. Thankfulness with no gift giver in mind. Gratitude simply for the sake of gratitude is really just a form of self-gratification, she's saying.

And it really only enhances our narcissistic tendencies. It's a form of self-help. So by contrast, Paul calls us to a kind of gratitude that has a very specific object outside of ourselves and that object is God.

[9 : 11] Now why would he say that? Well, places like James 1.17 tell us. It says in James 1.17, Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father.

So this is something that Paul, that James, that the apostles understood that every good gift, every good gift is a gift from God.

Everything. Now most of the time, these are things that come through people into our lives. But what they recognize is that that gift is ultimately something that has come from God.

And so the natural response should be to recognize that all of our gratitude should be aimed not only at the people in our lives. I'm not saying don't say thank you. What I'm saying is the thank you doesn't stop there.

We recognize that all of our gratitude is ultimately aimed at the giver, capital G, God himself. Now, as I'm getting into this, I recognize that it might be tempting to hear me nagging you like your mom. [10:19] You know, God is like your grandmother who sent you a sweater and it's July and your mom is like, you've got to write that thank you note. You haven't done that yet. You know, you need to say thank you to God, right? He's done all these nice things for you.

But we need to understand that it goes a lot deeper than that, that it's not only important that we recognize that God is the giver because it's simply a good thing, but rather there's a deep spiritual reality at work here.

You know, Romans 121, when I was just doing a search of all the ways that thankfulness and gratitude show up in Scripture, I was really struck again by what Paul says in Romans 121.

He's diagnosing the human condition and listen to what he says. He says, For although they knew God, these are people in the fallen world, people like us apart from Jesus.

He says, 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.

[11:24] So look at this diagnosis from Paul. He's saying, when we stop giving thanks to God and when we stop honoring God as God, in other words, as the ultimate giver, in the broader context, this is a place where Paul is talking about how we have exchanged the glory of God for the glory of the things that God has made.

So when we cut God off and when we cease to acknowledge that there is a giver, and when we cease giving thanks to that giver, recognizing that he's the ultimate source of all of the gifts in our lives, our thinking becomes futile and our hearts darkened.

And is this not exactly what we see in Genesis 3 at the fall of humankind? Is this not exactly what happens? You know, the fall was motivated not only by pride, but by ingratitude.

Ingratitude. I mean, God gives human beings the whole world except for one tree. You can have all of it.

It's all yours. You can multiply and expand and fill it and oversee it in my name. You can rule in my stead. It's all yours.

[12:42] And what do human beings say? Well, what about that tree? You know? Is that not human nature? That's my two-year-old every single day.

Well, I guess he's three now. Still acting like a two-year-old, though. Every single day. This is why we dismiss the kids so I can rip on them when they're downstairs.

And if I'm honest, it's me almost every single day. It's human nature. Focusing on what we don't have, focusing on what we're not given, rather than what has been given to us, that's futile thinking and it's a darkened heart at work.

So cultivating a habitual gratitude to God as the ultimate giver continually reorients our hearts out of ourselves and toward God. And if you're anything like me, we need that all the time.

Again and again and again. It's a habit of holiness. It reminds us that everything we have comes from him and that we're therefore dependent on him for everything.

[13:50] And interestingly enough, the more we cultivate gratitude for the ultimate giver, the more you will find that we become generous and thankful to the people in our lives.

The one encourages the other. It's interesting. Peter Lighthouse, a Bible scholar, wrote a book on gratitude and the history of gratitude particularly in the context of Greece and Rome when Christianity really emerged.

And he says that in ancient Greece and Rome, they considered gift giving and gratitude to be circular. So the proper response to a gift received was to return a gift or favor.

So you see how that could quickly go awry. I do something for you and then you owe me. And society expects you better pay me back. Well then I do something for you and then you owe me.

And what happens is you have the development of a patronage system.

And gift giving becomes a very effective way to manipulate and control people. Especially if you have a very well-resourced person doing something kind, a gift, for somebody who's not so well off. [14:59] The sense of indebtedness would quickly enslave people. And he says that Christianity introduced a radically God-centered approach that vastly enlarged the circle of gift and response.

The idea that God is the ultimate giver completely undermined Roman society and political life in profound ways. And it began to break the patronage system apart. Placing God at the center of all gift giving has major consequences.

And you see this in Jesus' disciples. They were to give to others without anticipating a return. You know, Jesus says don't give to somebody expecting them to repay it. Give to those specifically who can't repay you.

Because they knew that their reward would be from God. It freed them to give to those from whom they could never expect a return. Moreover, Christians were not to be beholden to anyone who gives to them.

So instead of owing favors back to the man or woman who had given them something and then owing allegiance to benefactors, the Christian's duty was to make good use of the gifts that were given.

[16:11] So Lighthouse nicely summarizes this view of gift and gratitude. He says this, Christian givers impose no debts. Christian recipients acknowledge no debts except to love.

So this is the way that we are to be shaped in our giving and serving to one another in the Christian community today. I give to you, I should expect nothing in return. If we say thank you, that's great, we should do that.

It'll help your immune system as well. That's good, we should say thank you. We should write thank you notes. These are all good habits. But we should never give and expect a thank you.

We should never give and resent somebody when they don't thank us the way we think we deserve. Because we ultimately look to God. So this is the first aspect of Christian gratitude that makes it unique.

It's the object of our gratitude. We believe that every good and perfect gift comes from God, the giver. The next unique aspect of Christian gratitude concerns the circumstances in which we give thanks.

[17:16] So hashtag gratitude really only focuses on things which we perceive to be good things. Right? So, you know, staying at the Waldorf tonight, hashtag gratitude.

You know, look at this amazing view from my deck, hashtag gratitude. Right? We look at the good things in our lives and we say, well, I should really be thankful for this. By contrast, 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, give thanks in all circumstances.

And then it goes on and this is something that applies to the whole of the section that we read. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. So people say, well, surely he doesn't mean, I mean, surely is he just kind of getting carried away and then Paul kind of drives it home?

No, this is the will of God in Christ for you. Give thanks in all circumstances. Do you know anything about Paul's life? It's amazing to look at the lists of sufferings that he endures.

He's beaten, he's tortured, he's imprisoned multiple times, he gets deathly ill, he has multiple near-death experiences, he has multiple shipwrecks, he describes times where he's naked and alone and feels betrayed by everybody.

[18:36] And yet he says, give thanks in all circumstances. And the reason is because he believed the theology that he lays out in Romans 8, 28. That he believed with all of his heart that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

For those who are called according to his purpose. He believed that and he lived it out. We had one of the most heated Bible studies.

Yeah, it's possible. Our staff had a heated Bible study discussion when the first chapter of Job came up. It is one of the most breathtaking passages in all of Scripture in my humble opinion.

I don't know if you caught it when we read it, but Job is a kind of epic poem. It's a unique genre. It's part of the wisdom literature. And it's an epic poem and in the beginning Job has it all.

He has a great family, he has a lot of wealth, he has a lot of land, he has a great home. But then God allows Satan to bring massive suffering into his life. So you hear four messengers come and Job finds out essentially that all of his wealth, all of his livestock, his home, and all of his children, all ten of his children are gone.

[19 : 54] And then how does Job respond to this news? I think this is one of the most amazing verses in the whole Bible. It says, Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshipped.

And he said, Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Oh. And then later, Job finds himself very ill, covered in boils. And you know what his wife says?

Oh, just curse God and die. Thanks. Job's response, Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord and not receive evil?

See, what Paul understands and I think what we see in the book of Job, I think one of the main themes in the book of Job is an incredibly unique way of understanding suffering.

[21 : 03] I don't think you find this anywhere else. Because in Job, God is not the one actively causing the suffering. He's not generating the suffering in Job's life. He's not making it happen.

When God created the world, the Bible tells us, he made it perfect. He made it a world without suffering. He made it a world without disease, a world without illness, a world without injustice. And we see suffering as being something that enters in.

something that enters in in the form of a serpent, evil and suffering and wickedness, but then ultimately takes root in this world because of us. Because we throw our lot in with that.

Instead of with God, we say, what about that one tree? And we throw everything else away to get it. But in Job, you see that God is not actively generating that suffering. He is allowing Satan to do that.

So he's allowing this to happen. And yet what we see is this. Satan is on a leash. He's on a leash. And at the very beginning, God says, I will permit you to do this, I will not permit you to do that.

[22 : 11] He gives him his parameters. He gives instructions. And Satan has no choice but to obey. This is not an epic battle of good versus evil and evil sometimes win and good sometimes wins.

This is God saying, I will give you permission to do this and only this. And there's no negotiation. And then if you see what ends up happening is this.

In the book of Job, God allows Satan to bring suffering into the world, but he only allows Satan enough leeway to accomplish the very opposite of what he intended.

The opposite of what, what's Satan's goal with Job? It's to get Job to do what his wife told him to do. Curse God and die. Give up. Lose your faith. But by the end of the book, what has happened?

God has returned to Job ten times over everything that he lost and Job is the one praying for and interceding for his friends. And Job is put up as the great example.

[23 : 12] So it's the opposite of Satan's intention. And of course, the ultimate example of this is the cross, right? On the cross, you see Jesus suffering worse than any man, woman, or child will ever suffer, ever.

It's the worst suffering imaginable. And yet, God uses the cross to bring about the most beautiful redemption, the most beautiful reality that the world has ever seen.

The worst suffering, and yet God brings out of that the most beautiful victory. By allowing Satan to have victory over Jesus on the cross, by allowing Satan to create that suffering, God ultimately defeats Satan and liberates us from sin and death.

It's because of that suffering that the Bible can make a promise that one day there will be no more suffering. So Paul sees this, I believe, and sees this and says that this is, the cross and the suffering of the cross is a paradigm.

It's a paradigm within which we should understand all of our suffering. He's saying, do you want to know the shape of suffering ultimately? It's the cross. And so Paul looks at this and he looks at the reality that he's imprisoned and beaten and rejected, that he's mocked and ridiculed and he looks at all of this suffering and he says, if God could take the unimaginable suffering of Jesus and bring out of that a thing of such beauty as the redemption of the world, then surely he can take my suffering and ultimately bring something beautiful out.

[24 : 52] He doesn't understand it. Anybody who tries to explain it to you, don't trust him. They're probably selling a book. It doesn't make sense. It won't make sense until Jesus comes again.

But there is that place in the book of Revelation at the very end when all things have been restored where it says Jesus will wipe away every tear. And I've always thought when I read that that that's more than just a poetic image that I believe that that's a place where God is promising a kind of reckoning.

Where there will come a time when every tear will make sense. That every tear will somehow fit. That we'll be able to look at the suffering in our lives and in the lives of everybody that we care about in the lives of the world and we'll be able to say about it what we can now say about the cross.

And I don't know how it's going to all play out. And I don't know how it's going to play out in your life. I don't know how it's going to play out in my life. But even though we don't know next week or next month or next year we know the end of the story.

Every tear gets wiped away. There's a reckoning. And at some point we'll understand that our suffering as hard as it might have been it was not meaningless and it was not wasted.

[26 : 10] So Christian gratitude is unique in that we give thanks to God as the giver and it's unique in the sense that we give thanks in all circumstances not only the good times but the hard times. Unless you believe in the cross and understand the kind of redemption that comes through it I don't know that you can give thanks in all circumstances.

If you don't believe in the cross like that do you know what it becomes? It becomes what Melissa on our team called band-aid thankfulness. A band-aid gratitude. You know the person who says oh you think you have it bad everybody else has it so much worse than you you should be thankful for what you have.

That's a band-aid that's emotionally dishonest. That's not what we're talking about here. We're saying the cross was horrible and yet God made it beautiful. The suffering in your life is horrible. Never diminish that and yet at some point God will do something beautiful. Maybe he already is. So the third and final thing that makes Christian gratitude unique is the reason for the gratitude that we have.

Why are we thankful? What's the source of it? That article I mentioned at the beginning of the service Barbara Ehrenreich's article she makes another interesting point. She links our current cultural obsession with gratitude to the power of positive thinking movement that sort of took hold over the last several decades in our culture.

[27 : 33] You know what I'm talking about? One of the more sort of far out ridiculous examples is that book called The Secret. Do you remember The Secret? Anybody sort of have the misfortune of coming across this?

Well anyway it basically says if you want that nice car or that expensive house or that nice necklace then you need to visualize it and you need to send the positive vibes out into the universe and that the universe will then return to you those things.

They say you know this is the secret across the ages and now we're going to let you in on the secret. I can't even say it with a straight face it's so ridiculous but this really takes hold and you know there are Christian versions of this.

There are tons of churches and tons of pastors that make a lot of money and sell a lot of books talking about the power of visualizing that house visualizing and having enough faith and praying enough or praying in a certain way and just seeing what God does and see if God doesn't give you that thing.

And so she says that this gratitude movement is sort of a continuation of that positive thinking movement post housing crash because you know our country got all swept up in this and buy a bigger house and get a bigger yard and all this stuff and then all of a sudden boom the bottom falls out and now we have to be a little more cautious maybe positive maybe that's a little but gratitude sounds good but it's still a way of trying to do the same thing.

[29 : 02] You know we look at this power of positive thinking we look at the sort of power of gratitude for the effect that it brings about our own you know just visualize it and you'll have it and what about all those people who still get cancer?

You know what about all those people who still get evicted? And the gospel shatters this delusion in a rather abrasive way. The gospel says that God owes us what? Nothing.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. The first thing to understand about the gospel the good news of Jesus is that God doesn't owe you anything. Job 41 11 says who has God is speaking here and he says who has given me anything that I need to repay?

Everything that exists is mine. God is saying what could you possibly do that I would need to repay you? All of this belongs to me. It's already mine. So the opposite of gratitude is not ingratitude really.

It's not precisely. The opposite of gratitude is entitlement. It's the idea that we're somehow owed something. And that idea is totally antithetical to the gospel.

[30 : 14] And it's interesting and it's worth saying because in our culture I believe that we're very quick to sort of pat ourselves on the back and pat one another on the back and you know that promotion or that credential or that accomplishment good job you earned it.

you earned it. And you hear that and you know as Christians we should say I earned it? Really? Really? It's all because of my hard work?

Really? We should is that all? I love the quote from George Monbiot he's kind of an activist writer he says if wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise every woman in Africa would be a millionaire.

The fact that our hard work has produced anything anything is due to factors that are outside of our control. The fact that our kind of stick-to-itiveness has produced anything is due to factors that we had no say in.

Right? Where we were born who our parents were the kind of schooling that we got the kind of neighborhood that we grew up in. You know, our race has nothing to do with our hard work.

[31 : 24] There are plenty of people that work way harder than us who have far less. The fact that we even survived to adulthood the fact that we were even born to begin with the fact that we can even sit here tonight with breath in our lungs is due to the factors largely outside of our control.

Right? So we take on average 23,000 breaths every day. The Bible says every single breath is a gift. So right there if you're making your list you know like Ann Voskamp a thousand gifts you have 23,000 to get you started.

Everything is a gift. And so that means that we live solely by the mercy of God. Solely by the mercy of God. You know, we have rights in our country. We have human rights.

And as Christians we believe that those rights are rooted in God and His creation of us. And so as Christians we should fight for the rights of others. Particularly for those who can't, don't have a voice of their own.

That's part of what being a Christian in the world is. But before God we have no rights. You have rights in this country you have no rights before God.

[32 : 35] So the reason for our gratitude is simple. You read it in places like Ephesians 1 verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. Why do we give thanks? What's the reason? Because at some point before you existed God decided that He was going to bless you.

And that is the only reason that you're here. It's the only reason that we're here. So the gospel is this. God owes you. God owes us nothing and yet He's given us everything.

That's the reason that we give thanks. He owes us nothing and yet He's given us everything. So I pray that we would be people who cultivate gratitude.

This is not something that we can hear tonight and say okay now I'm going to be thankful done on to the next thing. It's a habit of holiness. It's something that needs to be cultivated again and again and again and again and again in our lives.

[33 : 46] There are lots of great ways of doing this. I mentioned Ann Voskamp. She wrote a book One Thousand Gifts. Virtually every woman in the western hemisphere has read it. If you've not it's good. It's worth a read but essentially it lays out her experience her experience of moving to a place of greater awareness of the gifts of God by writing a list of a thousand things and it really shifts her perspective but I would say this one of the best ways to begin cultivating a sense of gratitude is through the meal that we're about to share here.

In a little while we're going to come together and we're going to share a meal that we call the Eucharist and what does Eucharist mean? It simply means Thanksgiving. You know there's a debate over how do you approach the table at the Eucharist like how do we come to it?

What should our posture be? Should we be penitent and reflective of our sin? Should we come sort of with our heads sort of lowered in a posture of sort of humble hope for mercy?

Or should it be celebratory? Should it be more like a party? Like a festival? And people debate what's the proper tone? I would say both. I would say both in equal measure.

Because here's the thing. You know what gratitude is? It's not just something that you think. It's not just something that you feel. Sometimes you have to give thanks in order to feel thankful.

[35 : 12] Here's what gratitude is. Gratitude is what comes out of our hearts when the truth of who we are collides with the truth of what God has given us in Jesus.

When the truth of who we are collides with the truth of what God has given us in Jesus, the ultimate gift, what comes out is gratitude.

So when we come to this table, let us come with hearts overflowing with gratitude, ready to receive the gift of Christ, ready to give thanks to the giver, the ultimate giver, ready to give thanks regardless of whatever circumstances you find yourself in tonight, and ready to give thanks because we know that all of this is an undeserved gift purely out of God's love for you and for me. Let's pray. Lord, may we not be ingrates in your presence.

May we recognize some afresh and some perhaps for the first time the extraordinary gift of Jesus Christ and may that produce in us, as Paul says in Colossians, hearts that overflow with gratitude, that it would be too much for us.

[36 : 39] And may this be the font of our obedience to you. May it be the wellspring of life in our church and may it be that which motivates us to desire that one day every tongue would confess the name of Jesus Christ.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.