The Great Gratitude Fade-Out

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Preacher: The Rt. Revd Mike Hill

[0:00] As we said, let's pray together, shall we? Our gracious Father, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that the Lord Jesus taught us that your word is truth.

And Father, we pray now that in the power of your Holy Spirit, we might discern your truth, and your truth would impact our lives, that we might be the people you call us to be.
In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the book of Deuteronomy, we read these words, Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God.
If I think about my own life, I think about the things that have gone right, and there's so much that's gone right, I've always regarded myself as a person who has been very blessed.
But then I have days when things don't feel so right, and on those days, it's very easy to lose perspective. Those of you who know your Bibles will know that if you read a psalm like Psalm 73, you're reading about a man called Asaph.
[1:27] And clearly Asaph, when he wrote this psalm, was what we would call today clinically depressed. He had lost all sense of perspective.

All he could do was look at the people around himself and compare himself with them, and he would find himself wanting, resentful, angry, that even the evildoers, he said, are doing better than me, Lord.
Of course, that's not true. As Jesus said in the New Testament, the rain falls on the good and bad alike. But this man had lost perspective. It was all about him.
I was feeling pretty low recently. As many of you know, and thank you so much for your prayers and care for us during the time of Anthea's illness.
But I was feeling pretty low. Being a primary carer is not my default position. In fact, to be quite honest with you, I would hate to be looked after by somebody like me.
[2:45] Unless you particularly like baked potatoes. Just saying. So I was feeling pretty fed up.
And then somebody I've known for a long time wrote a card and said to me, you know, Mike, I know this is tough, but you have so many things to thank God for.

And I was humbled because I had forgotten to be as thankful as I really ought to be for the life that God has given to me.
Not every day has been great. But I don't want to be one of those people. You might be one of them. Who just ends up being ungrateful and slips into a life of unrelenting bitterness.
And my dear friend, if that's you, what you need to know is that people spot a bitter person within about 30 seconds of meeting them.
It's ugly. So I'm standing here this morning to talk to you about gratitude. The Great Gratitude Fadeout is the title of the talk today.
[4:02] That idea that actually we can forget the Lord our God. Forget the works of His hand upon our lives.

And I want to begin by saying to you what I'm not talking about this morning. Seems a bit weird to say that, but I thought there were three ways I could approach this.
Here's one which I'm not talking about. This is not a review of the way human history, our view of human history has changed in recent years.
I was born in 1949. That means I'm 73 to save you the math. In the 1950s, whilst recognizing that the history of the United Kingdom had some pretty awful moments within it.
say awful, I could say wicked moments within it. But generally at that time, people were thankful to be British.
[5:10] They were even patriotic. A new queen had arrived on the throne promising to give her life in service to her subjects.

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Not a word that many of you are comfortable with. But people were thankful to be British. Sixty years on, and after what is called today revisionist history, many of us don't think like that anymore. Today, many academics, Marxists and others, take the view that we need to forget any allegiance whatsoever to our country, any allegiance in terms of patriotism, and that the history that we were taught in the 1950s needs to be retold.
Of course, there is something in that. It is pretty true that actually the history that most of us have been termed, have been written by white men for white men.
But actually, as Professor Nigel Bigger in the University of Oxford wrote, and got cancelled pretty well within the university, this is a professor of moral philosophy, he dared to suggest that not all about colonialism was terrible for the people on the receiving end of it.
[6:40] Revisionist historians hate our colonial past and anything to do with it. Revered heroes of that history are despised and cancelled, written out of the history script, and their statues torn down and thrown into the water.

So let me be clear, that's not what I'm talking about. Neither am I talking about a trend in theology. I know this is a moment when you might switch off.
A trend in theology that emerged during the first wave of the renewal movement, what we call a charismatic movement back in the day. This movement was led by an extraordinary ex-military man called Merlin Carruthers.
Merlin Carruthers was an extraordinary man. He'd served in a very prestigious division of the American Army, the 82nd Airborne Division. This was a man who must have known what it was like to put himself in very tight spots in his life.
What was his theological conviction? It was based around a very simple idea. Incidentally, his book, some of you may have read him, his book sold 90 million copies and were translated into 59 different languages.
[8:08] The most read of his books was a book called From Prison to Praise. His theological trend had a very simple idea.

He said this, we should praise God in all situations, not merely in spite of our problems, but for our problems. Can you imagine that?
You're going through a really hard time in your life and Merlin Carruthers is telling you, praise God for your situation. Why? Because, says Merlin Carruthers, when we praise God, praise releases the power of God into situations and enables us and empowers us and empowers us to use those problems and turn them to God.
Because praise involves an element of gratitude, it could be very relevant to today's message, but this is not what I want to talk to you about today.
there is something in what Merlin Carruthers said, and I wouldn't want to lose that, but like most trends in theology or new or rediscovered trends in theology, the case was probably overstated.
[9:39] Pastorally, I would suggest to you, and we know more about this stuff these days, that to tell people to praise God for being sexually abused seems to me to be a bit of a long shot, or to praise God for those spouses who suffer from extreme control from their partners.

I ask myself in those situations, who is it that really needs to learn something? Today's theme is the great gratitude fade-out.
The idea that being a thankful person can readily become stale in our lives, can fade out. And so I want to do two things this morning.
Not saying I'll achieve them, but this is my desire. Firstly, I want to answer the question, why is consistency in being grateful important?
in our discipleship. And secondly, I want to try and give you some tips on how you might maintain a consistently grateful heart.
[10:55] Recognizing that this is not easy when life is hard for you. And for many of us in the house today, life is hard.

two voices from the past who tell us why gratitude is important. The first is Meister Eckhart, who is a 13th century German theologian.
He said this, if the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough. The second voice is that of Marcus Cicero, a man who lived before Christ and who was a Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, philosopher, and academic, all of those things.

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He said this, gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but it is the parent of all others. Clearly, whoever wrote the book of Deuteronomy thought that the risk for God's people, you and me, was that they would forget, we would forget, what God has done for us.
And the consequence would be a diminished response of gratitude. gratitude. And so he pleads with them to remember, do not forget.
[12:28] He tells us that three factors will play into our fading memories. The first is disobedience. You want to live your life your way, as per Frank Sinatra, then you will discover that one of the consequences of that is that gratitude will slip away.

Isaiah chapter 64 and verse 6. We read these, All of us, said Isaiah, all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.
We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind, our sins sweep us away. So let me ask you a question.
Would you describe your life as shriveled, less than it could be? Because there are things going on in your life that only you, or maybe those who are close do you know about.
It's difficult to live a thankful life, a life of gratitude if you decided to do life your way. Secondly, there is the resulting complacency that comes from normalizing sin in your life.
[14:02] We pick that up in Deuteronomy, don't we? Where the writer says this, I'm struck again by it as Suzanne read it to us. He says this, be careful you don't forget the Lord your God.

And then verse 12, otherwise when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase, and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget what the Lord your God has done with you.
In the book previous to the book of Deuteronomy is the book of Numbers, where there is the most unbelievable scenario, and it's this.
Moses has led the people of God out of bondage in Egypt, a horrible life, a life of extreme violence, extreme work.
The Egyptians were like this, right? This is the kind of bosses the Egyptians were. The task was to build bricks, but they never gave people enough raw materials to make the bricks, and then beat them when they didn't meet their quota.
[15:17] Let me ask you a question. Would you like to work for an employer like that? Okay, someone say no. No. You would hate that. So complacency can easily set into our lives peace.

When we become comfortable, we can forget, says the writer of the book of Deuteronomy. And the third reason, and I would imagine the most relevant reason to the people sitting in the house today, is what theologians call your sit in laban, your setting in life.
I guarantee that if you stand at the back of the church and people walk out through the door and somebody says to them, how are you?
What are you going to say? I'm fine, thanks. Listen, you've got to get over it. Many of you in the house today are far from fine and nobody much knows about it.
And the problem with holding on to the stuff that's not working in your life is that it will grow something terrible in your soul.
[16:46] It will grow a root of bitterness. I'll tell you again, if you're a bitter person, people will work it out within about 20 minutes. I'm not just talking about grumpy old men, incidentally.

I am. I'm an A-level student, honestly. So, disobedience that results in complacency in your situation in life.
Let's just read again what God says about that. In verse 7, God is promising his people a great life. They're going to come out of bondage in Egypt and enter a land that will be extremely productive for them.
Economically, they're not going to have problems. In terms of provision, they're not going to have problems, but the warning is. And is this a warning for 21st century Europeans?
when you get comfy, the danger is you're going to be complacent and stop thanking God. Verse 10, our text, the writer of Deuteronomy tells us, don't forget to thank God for what he has given you.
[18:04] I need to learn that just recently. I've got so much to thank God for, to sit in my own mire, feeling sorry for myself as a primary carer.

It's not particularly a winsome trait. Somehow, we've got to get past that.

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Third thing is, verse 11, there's a reminder that we need to keep God's laws and commandments, because this was to old covenant people. The old covenant people who did not receive the Holy Spirit in general, but if you're a Christ follower, you have received the Holy Spirit.
What the Holy Spirit is meant to do in your life is change you from the inside out. The Lord tried to change you from the outside in. God had a plan B, and plan B was God is trying to change you from the inside out.
You'll think that having the Holy Spirit means you might sing a bit louder or wave your arms around in worship. No, it's the tough stuff of transformation, change from the inside out.
[19:14] Don't forget that. And verses 12 and 14, I read that to you. Beware the complacency when you try and mix the grace of God with your own disobedience.

grace of Jesus. So, I want to close by telling you, suggesting to you, that an ungrateful disciple is an oxymoron.
Anybody who's a disciple of Jesus should be intrinsically grateful. I don't think you'd disagree with that, but the issue is, how can we stay thankful?
How can we stop the great gratitude fade out, not for all situations, but in all situations? I realize that is very challenging, particularly for those of you who are finding love uncompromisingly tough at the moment.
so here are five things, very briefly, that you could do to try and maintain gratitude in your life.
[20:32] One, wake up thankful. The first thing I suggest you could do every day is to start thinking about what can I say thank you for?

Well, the first thing you can thank God for is your breathing still. wake up thankful.
It sets a tone for the day. If you wake up and the first thing you think about is all the stuff you really don't want to do today, that's going to have a negative impact on the rest of the day as far as I can see.
Wake up thankful, one. Two, remember the most basic thing that God has done for you. I like to quietly say to myself that verse from William Walsham Howe's wonderful hymn.
It is a thing most wonderful. It's a marvelous hymn. I sometimes think about the cross and close my eyes and try to see the cruel nails and crown of thorns and Jesus crucified for me.
[21:42] If you're a Christ follower and you don't get that, you're probably not a Christ follower. You might be a church goer, but you won't be a Christ follower. Until you understand the pain, the part of the cross, until you understand the peace of the cross, the peace that that brings to sinner's souls.

Unless you understand that and thank God for it daily, you will struggle. Sometimes think about the cross.
Maybe we all need to think about that a little more. Third thing is throughout the day and especially at the end of the day, thank God for the small things throughout that day that have brought you joy. Be a joy hunter. Little things. I am so incompetent, especially as a carer, that I thank God when something goes right, it gives me joy.
I try to boil an egg, can you believe this? It exploded. It exploded. Thank God for the power of nature.
[23:06] Being thankful for the small acts of grace that you see, the small acts of mercy, the small acts of effort, whatever will help you cultivate gratitude for the bigger things.

I wonder if this is true. It's not biblical, but it strikes me as potentially true, and that is if we're grateful for the small things, maybe we'll be grateful for the bigger things.
But I also think that works in reverse as well. Fourth thing is always thank others for anything they do for you at work, at school, at home, wherever God puts you for the other six days of the week.
I think again, if you become a person who's very happy to express thanks all the time, you are more likely to build a consistently thankful heart in your own life.
And surprisingly, a lot of people aren't very good at this. And surprisingly, even more surprising is, a lot of people in churches are not very good at this.
[24:16] there are not many churches that will do what we have done this morning. And that is, ask people to stand up who are involved in a particular area of ministry so we can thank God for them and honor them.

I have a friend who was very, very involved in his church in France. He even bought a house that would facilitate a congregation on a Sunday morning.

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It had a massive room in it. He bought chairs so that people could sit down, all that stuff. You know what, he doesn't even go to the Church of England anymore because when he left, not one person said thank you.
That's a church for crying out loud. We should be honoring people, thanking them for their dramatic and undramatic and menial acts of giving.
They're just talking about money, we've done that. And the final thing is this. Remind yourself every day that everything you are, everything you ever will be, everything you have is a gift from God.
[25:53] We're losing that sense in our secular society, aren't we? Sometimes I worry that we don't see children as a gift anymore, we just see them as an acquisition to manage.

Everything you are, everything you will ever be is a gift of God. It might not be a bad thing for you as you get into bed tonight, just to do a very brief self-audit to establish why it might be that you're not as grateful as you might be.
So let me close, I want to speak to you today, to those of you who know full well that sin and complacency has overtaken your life and you've been overtaken by and obsessed with self-gratification.
Not being thankful to God, but just seeking to gratify your own desires. Second, I want to speak clearly to those of you who know that a root of bitterness dominates your life and has robbed you of the joy of being a grateful person.
And finally, I want to speak to those of you who have effectively discounted the cost of what it cost God to forgive you your sins.
[27:28] Maybe it was a time when you were hot for that, but now it's barely a flicker in your remembrance of what God has done to you. The power of God's love left you behind years ago and maybe coming to church is born of habit now rather than born of conviction.

salvation. I'm praying that right now God is speaking directly into your heart.
Forget me, it's about what God wants to say to you. And those of you who have got ungrateful hearts are going to find it harder to listen than those of you who have grateful hearts.
is this your moment? Is this your moment to stop being bitter? To stop being willfully disobedient to the call of the life that God has for you?
Is this your moment? Let's pray. Father, Father, we are so inconsistent somehow in our discipleship.
[28:58] And Lord, maybe when this consistently and persistently comes to being people who are thankful. Lord, for those of us who know full well today that gratitude has faded out in our lives, we pray, Lord, that you give us the courage today to do something about it and turn up the volume that we might have thankful hearts.

Lord, let that begin now. Maybe even at the end of the service we need to go to somebody and thank them for some small, maybe undramatic, take a menial act of service that they have done.
Lord, maybe we need to be thankful, more thankful to the staff of this church who seek to bring the good news of the gospel, what God has done in Jesus to us and to the wider world.
God, we pray your forgiveness if we've discounted the cost of what you did for us on the cross of Calvary.
Sometimes I think about the cross and close my eyes and try to see the cruel nails and crown of thorns and Jesus crucified for me.
[30:33] Holy Spirit, would you burnish that act of history in our hearts that we might be truly grateful people.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name and the people who agreed said together emphatically, Amen.

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