

Grate{full} – How the Gospel Makes Us Thankful

Goal

Colossians 1:9-14

Mark Vroegop

“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:9–14 ESV).

Introduction

I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday and that you are looking forward to the next number of weeks as you celebrate this Christmas season, gather with family and friends, and think about what it means for Jesus to have come and for him to return. That's what the advent season is all about.

For the next six weeks, we're going to talk about something that all of you will know that you need to do, but my guess is you probably don't do it enough. It's not going to the doctor, it's not going to the dentist. It is instead saying thanks. So, you know that you should say thank you. You know that it's polite and that it's socially acceptable. But the question is: do you understand why gratitude, or a heart of gratefulness, is so important? If you're a follower of Jesus, I want to help you see over the next number of weeks, that this attitude of gratefulness is actually the heart of what it means for you to understand the gospel.

In other words, if you know what Jesus has done for you, and if you have received him and know that your sins are forgiven, then thanksgiving flows from this beautiful well of God's grace in your life. If you're not yet a Christian, I hope you'll see that the goodness, the kindness of God, is meant to lead you to what the Bible calls repentance. For you to see that the good gifts that God gives you every single day—your heart is beating, your lungs are filling with air, you're alive today—isn't because of you, but instead because of God's kindness to you. I want you to see that God has a purpose and a plan for your life.

Today, we're going to begin in the book of Colossians. As we look at chapter one, I'm going to give you an overall tour of this idea of gratitude.

Today's message will be anchored in Colossians 1, but it's going to be much more topically-based. You will need your Bible because we're going to go all the way from Genesis all the way through into the New Testament, to the book of Romans as well. We're going to look at the goal of gratitude—the goal of having a grateful heart.

The aim of this series is to help you understand the deep significance of the theme of gratitude in the life of the believer. In so doing, I hope to then encourage you to evaluate your present level of gratitude. Candidly, there are some in this room who, in just the last few days, have talked more about what didn't go right than what did go right. You have spent a lot more time talking about the annoying relative than the really wonderful relative. You have talked more about the problems in life, than you the blessings of life.

For some of you, life is filled with all kinds of levels of anxiety, gloominess, fear right now. Some of you struggle with bitterness and one of the reasons may very well be because the thing you are just obsessed with is what isn't right in your life. Some of you may have an orientation, just kind of how you're wired and personality wise, that you look at life with a glass half full perspective. There are also some, myself included, who see opportunity as half empty—an opportunity for something to be even better. So, whenever I go on a family vacation, I'm thrilled with what we did, but I always think about how it could have been even better.

Sometimes, that can lead to things going south. It can be really negative to start reflecting on everything that's broken instead of the things that have been so good. I'm actually preaching this series because I need this series. I'm preaching this series because I want to grow in what it means to have a grateful and thankful heart.

Today, we're going to consider, “what is the goal in considering gratitude?” Or: “why should we be thankful?” What I want to do is give you a definition of gratefulness and help you understand the malfunction of gratitude. Then, we'll look at some applications and before I have you take inventory as to where you are on the scale of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Background

Now, because we're sort of parachuting into Colossians chapter one, there are a few things you need to know about this book. First and foremost, the book of Colossians is amazing. If you're looking for a place to read in your Bible beginning this next year, go to Colossians because, at the end of the day, this book is about Jesus. It's about the centrality of who Jesus is. The church at Colossae was planted by the apostle Paul during his third missionary journey, likely when he was in the city of Ephesus. While remaining there for three years, Paul then made excursions to various cities and sent a man named Ephaphra to Colossae to plant this church. Ephaphra, who was a native of that city, returned to Colossae in order to plant the church there in his hometown.

Paul writes this letter to this church while he's in prison in Rome in order to help the church understand what it means to follow Jesus and to help them walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which God has called them. Those of you who were here when I first came to College Park in 2008 might remember that this was the first book we ever walked through. We talked about the core and what it meant for Christ to be preeminent. This is a special, special book.

Definition

So, how would we define gratitude? Look at verse nine. Here, Paul says, "And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding."

For what purpose? Here it is,

"So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May he be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy."

And then here comes the key little participle phrase, verse 12, "Giving *thanks* to the father." Now go up to verse three. Paul leads off this letter with this very theme of gratitude. He says, "We always *thank* God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you."

It is really important that you notice what Paul doesn't say in this letter. He doesn't say, "We want to thank you for how godly you are." He doesn't say, "We want to thank you for your faithfulness." No, he says that we always thank who? God.

We always thank God. Similarly, verse 12 says, "giving thanks to the *Father*." So, by way of a definition, here's a way to think about what gratitude is: gratitude is amazement with God. The idea is that gratitude is the mindset in which all of the roads lead back to wonder and worship, where the thoughts that you have about what God does lead you to consider not just the gift or the goodness of what has been received, but actually lead you to think about and ponder the supremacy of God above all things. These gifts cause you to think about, and to stand amazed at, who God is.

You can think of gratitude this way: amazement with God. It is simply the right response to both who God is and what he has done because if you understand who God is, there's going to be gratitude. If you understand what God has done, there's going to be gratitude—such that a lack of gratitude isn't just bad theology. No, a lack of gratitude is actually idolatry—where we think that somehow we deserve something different, better, than what God has already provided. So, in the opening chapter of this book, Paul draws a direct line between what is happening in the church and God's grace in them. He sees what's going on in them and he marvels, not just at the things that are happening in the church, but that God would do those things in the church.

Let me show you this in verses 9 to 14. Notice the way in which the things that Paul describes here are things that God does to them. He's not commending them for their activity. Rather, he's marveling at what God is doing in the church. Look at verse 9: "And so from the day we heard we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding."

So, it's not just that they would understand. It's not just that they would have spiritual wisdom. Paul wants them to be filled. Notice that this is something God has to do in them. He says that, "they would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord." None of that is possible without what's been said previously. He says, "Fully pleasing to him," and then makes this statement "Bearing fruit in every good work."

One of the reasons the Bible talks about bearing fruit is because of the activity that seems to have happened is based upon something else that's behind the scenes. The bearing of fruit is not necessarily credited to the church, but to God, through them. Then, he says, "May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy (v. 11)." He wants them to be strengthened. Notice that they need to be filled. They need to be strengthened—and the word used in verse 12 is a present active participle, which means this is the kind of behavior that in light of what's been said in the past, should characterize them. This is what they should be doing all the time in light of the fact that they are being filled with the knowledge of God, that they are walking worthy of the calling that God has placed upon them, and that they are being strengthened with all power.

Paul says, "That they should give thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance in the saints in life." And then he talks about the essence of the gospel: "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." So, while all of these things are happening in this church, while Paul sees the way in which they're spiritually growing, and he thanks God for that work in them. He doesn't commend them. He commends God's grace in them. There's a world of difference.

The difference between a mindset of gratitude and a mindset of ingratitude is whether or not you see the connection between what is happening and what God is doing. To be ungrateful is to simply see the things that are happening and make no connection to God himself. That is why, as I'll show you in a moment, the essence of what it means to understand the beauty of the gospel is to regularly make the connection—a thing to the creator, a reality to who God is. The essence of idolatry is to terminate that connection. It is to say, "I deserve it. I'm awesome. This is the way it should be. This is right. I should have perfect Thanksgivings with excellent turkey. That's the way that it rolls. This is what humanity was designed for, our greatness."

The Bible says that is the essence of what idolatry is. This word in verse 12, "giving thanks," is a very important word. I'm going to draw this out on a board here so you can understand it and see the construction of this Greek word. It is the word *euchristo*, and it signifies the act of giving thanks.

In order to understand this word, you need to see three parts of it. The participle makes it active. It is the central word within the word, and it is the word for grace. A form of this word is also the word for joy. What is interesting is that the word *thanks* takes the word you and attaches it to the word *grace*. And the word *eu* is the word *good*. So, if you know of a eulogy, it's the word *logos*, meaning *word*, *eu* meaning *good*. It's a "good word" about somebody who has deceased.

Well, why is this important? Because offering gratitude simply means that I'm taking the grace that I'm receiving and I'm acknowledging the grace that I've received as that which it is, namely good. Gratitude is not just receiving the gift. Gratitude is acknowledging the goodness of the gift that I have received. So, when God gives grace, when he gives joy, when he gives gifts, gratitude is acknowledging the goodness of that which God has provided. So again, it's not just enough to have received. We should regularly take that good grace that God has given us and talk about it, affirm it, and say that it is in fact good.

I was traveling recently, and I happened to hear this statement in the midst of a security protocol: "When you see something. . ." Now, finish the sentence. Right: ". . .say something." What it means is that if you see something suspicious, you should say something about it. When you see something, say something. Here's the theme that I want you living in for the next month. When you see grace, say thanks. When you see grace, say thanks. This requires two things. It requires, (1) a regular identification of the grace you have received, and (2) a commitment to talk about the goodness you have been given. It's one mistake to not understand or see the grace. It's also a mistake to not talk about the grace. Let me show you this in a couple of other texts.

This is not just the way that Paul talks to the church at Colossae, this is also the way that he to the Ephesian church. Ephesians chapter one says,

"For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayer" (Eph. 1:15).

So, who is he giving thanks to? Is he thanking the church? No. He's giving thanks to God. Similarly, we see in Matthew chapter 15 that when Jesus is feeding of the 5,000, he takes the loaves and the fishes and gave thanks. We see here that even Jesus recognizes the grace-gifts of the father and he returns thanks for it.

Many of you may pray before a meal. Do you know why you do that? Often, we even phrase it as "saying grace." In saying that, we're identifying: This meal is grace. It isn't just food. I'm seeing a thing

To just eat or just walk about life receiving all sorts of guests without acknowledging them is not gratefulness.

This regular acknowledgement of grace is supposed to be so much a part of our life: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17). Yet, sometimes we stop there. We miss the second half of the verse which says, "Giving thanks to God the Father through him."

In other words, one of the ways that Christians live and one of the ways that they do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, is recognizing that all that they have and all that they are and all they consume and all they see and all they breathe and all they live and all they enjoy, is only because of the grace of God. So, they look at their life and see grace, grace, grace, grace, grace, grace, grace.

That's hard—grace, grace, grace, grace, grace, grace, grace—right? Christians say to God, “this is really difficult and yet I know somewhere in this there is grace.” William Cooper once said, "Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face." Christians believe, even behind clouds that seem to be dark, there's grace. In first Corinthians 1:4, we see a passage that talks very clearly about the priority of thankfulness and gratefulness and its connection to the grace of God. Here, Paul says, "I give thanks to my God for *because of the grace that was giving you in Christ Jesus.*"

There it is, and it couldn't be clearer in its connection to eucharist. What gratefulness is, is the acknowledgement, the amazement, that everything we have is an entire act of God's grace. Do you know how much grace you've consumed already this morning? I mean, you're here. You had a vehicle or a friend that could get you here. You're sitting with people who aren't accosting you or making fun of you. There is all kinds of grace.

What the Bible calls you to, is to recognize how much grace you're given, even in the cases you don't easily realize. I was thinking of this in light of a video I saw a number of months ago. For a while on social media, there was this offer for glasses that enabled the colorblind to see colors. The glasses were very popular and there were many videos of adults putting on those glasses and suddenly seeing things like they'd never seen them before. In one segment, you could see the visible joy on the face of a man the moment he put on the glasses. He looked and down the road and declared with amazement that there is a red truck. And he said to his wife and daughter, "Look, it's a truck, it's a red truck! Look, it's a red truck!"

The man's enthusiasm was childlike. He was acting with the joy of a four-year-old, beholding the beautiful red truck that he'd never seen before. Listen, this is what children do. They give us beautiful eyes to see the world that as adults we tend to lose over the course of our lifetime. We tend to lose the beauty of a sunrise. We lose the beauty of the laughter of children in our home. And here's how you know you're starting to miss it, because you don't recognize how valuable those things are until they're gone. It is then that you start to think, "I should have been more grateful." That's when regret comes in. And if you're not careful, you might come to a point in your life when you realize that you spent so much time complaining about wasn't true, you never took careful inventory as to how gracious God really was.

By definition, gratitude means amazement with God. It means to call the gifts of God good. That's what we do.

Malfunction

Now I want to show you the malfunction. We see this play out in Genesis 3. What's interesting is that what happened in the Garden of Eden, the malfunction of humanity, was not just Adam and Eve getting ahold of what they shouldn't have. At the source, the malfunction was the problem of ingratitude.

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made, and this serpent, the embodiment of Satan, said to the woman, 'did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,' but God said, 'you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it lest you die.' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You shall not surely die. God knows when you eat of it, your eyes will be open and you will be like God knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was the desire to be made one wise, she took off its fruit and ate and she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate" (Gen. 3:1-6).

Ann Voskamp, in her excellent book *One Thousand Gifts* wrote,

"Satan wanted more. More power, more glory. And ultimately in his essence, Satan is an ingrate. He sinks his venom into the heart of Eden. Satan's sin becomes the first sin of all humanity. The sin of ingratitude. Adam and Eve, simply painfully, ungratefully did not acknowledge what God gave. . . Isn't that a catalyst for all my sins? We hunger for something more, something other. And standing before the tree laden with fruit withheld, we listened to Eve's murmur, in the day you eat from it, your eyes will be open. But in the beginning our eyes were already open. Our sight was perfect. Our vision let us see a world spilling with goodness. Our eyes fell on nothing but the glory of God. We saw God as he truly is, good, but we were lured by the deception that there was more to a full life. There was more to see. And true, there was more to see. The ugliness that we hadn't beheld, the sinfulness we hadn't witnessed, and the loss we hadn't known."

The essence of what happened in the garden is ingratitude. God provided what they need, and yet rather than being thankful, they wanted something more. I want you to think back of your sin issues over the last year. My guess is that you can trace most of them back to this very issue. Covetousness, lust, idolatry, lying, stealing, saying things you shouldn't. If you boil them down, their roots are sunk into the soil of not ingratitude for what God has done, for who he is, for who you are.

What's true in the Old Testament is also true in the New. In Romans 1, the apostle Paul is diagnosing the sinful condition of humanity. He is helping us to understand what is wrong with the world. And he says this, "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

The Bible says that the created order screams that God exists. For you to deny his existence or act as though God isn't real, means you have to work really hard to pretend that the creation of the world doesn't tell you there's a creator.

For instance, you witnessed the birth of a baby and hold new life. You have to work really hard to think, "Yeah, this just happened. There's no divine creator behind all of this." Paul then says, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or *gave thanks to him*." So, Paul identifies that a lack of gratitude is the essence of what it means for humanity to be lost in its futile thinking: "They became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools. Exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

This is what can happen. Rather than seeing the created world as a means to commune with God, we either set our affections on those things or detract from God's glory. As a result, we *use* the gifts instead of seeing them as a conduit to tell us something about God and his glory.

It is similarly stated in 2 Timothy 3. Here, the apostle Paul wants Timothy to understand the nature of the world in which he lives so he can shepherd people well as a pastor. He describes the end days with the following characteristics: "For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy. . ."

Now, I'm not going to read the rest of the list. But I would encourage you to see that the Bible says ingratitude should be on that list. That is because the malfunction of gratitude is the essence of idolatry. Why? Because everything God has done is purposed to be the means by which our hearts are brought to the realization of how amazing and incredible God truly is.

This is what makes a heart of gratitude so important. If you're a Christian, it means that when you're grateful, you are doing the very thing that God intended for you to do with the gifts that he's given you. But it also means that when you are not grateful, you are short-circuiting the very thing that God meant to create wonder in you and you're either feeding this inward-growing idolatry or this sense of bitterness and anger because of what you don't have.

Application

What I want you to do this morning is to think with me about five particular places that you might be in life:

1. Unaware

As it relates to gratitude, some of you are unaware, meaning you just haven't thought about gratitude in a long time. You know that God gives gifts, but you're just living your life. You need this message today to simply wake you up to the fact that you have a lot to be thankful for.

2. Ungrateful

Some of you though, are in another seat. Where instead of being unaware, you're actually ungrateful. You know you receive gifts; you know you receive kindness from the Lord, but you just aren't saying thank you.

Either you think you deserve them or just because of the habit of your life, you've just begun to see these a blessings as pretty normal things. Then, when something is taken away from you, something goes crazy in your soul.

3. **Bitter**

This unresolved ingratitude then leads to bitterness. This is when you're actually at a point where you think you deserve more. You're not unaware; you're not ungrateful. You're angry. You think you deserve these blessings, so gratitude for God is a long way away.

4. **Responsive**

On the other side of the equation, moving positively from being unaware is being responsive. My hope is that, through this sermon series, you'll move along this continuum and become a person who's responsive; that this week, you'll think about the grace gifts you've received and you'll start practicing eucharist. When you see grace, you'll say, thanks. You'll start thanking God.

5. **Worshipful**

The ultimate goal would be that gratitude is not only something that you say, but something that creates an unbelievable level of worship in your soul. In this seat, you look at God's gifts and you not only say, "God thank you for a sunrise," but also, "God, it's unbelievable that you make sunrises like that." It's recognizing and worshipping God as the giver of good gifts.

My hope is that some of you will move from a position of bitterness, ungratefulness, or just being unaware, to responsive and then worship. At the end of the day, gratitude is an amazement with God. So, in which of these seats does God find you in today?

As you think on that, I want to offer you a challenge. For the next sixty days, I challenge you to write down five things you're thankful for, in the morning, on a sticky note. Then write five things in the evening, on a sticky note, and put those on the back of your Bible, so that by the end of this week, you'll have recorded sixty graces over which you have said, "God, this is good." Don't repeat them. Pick five in the morning, five at night. For some of you over the next week, your whole perspective on what God has done in your life could radically begin to shift.

God knows where you are. No hiding from him. And maybe this is part of how God, by his grace, will help you become a person who sees the grace of God more clearly. So are you bitter? Are you ungrateful? Are you unaware? Responsive? Do you worship? When you see grace, say thanks.

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