

## Grate{full} – How the Gospel Makes Us Thankful

Giving

1 Thessalonians 5:14-18

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*“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” (1 Thess. 5:14–18 ESV).*

I think I was in sixth grade when I learned about “muscle memory.”

Kalamazoo Valley Community College hosted a week-long basketball camp. Part of the instruction during the week involved learning proper shooting mechanics—bend the knees, ball on the fingertips, hand back, elbow in and lined up with your knee, release the arm, and the most important part: follow through like you are putting your hand in a bucket.

For many of us, it was the first time we learned how to shoot a basketball correctly. And it was hard to keep everything lined up and in the right order. They recommended that we keep making the motion—even as we walked through the lunch line at noon. But the coaches made us this promise: if you keep doing this motion over and over, it will become second nature.

They called it “muscle memory.”

The idea is not that the muscle has brainpower. Rather, it simply means that you’ve made a particular motion enough times that the patterns of brain-to-muscle become almost instinctive. While developing muscle memory feels awkward at first, it soon becomes second nature.

### **Gratefulness Muscle**

The vision for this series in December is to help you develop spiritual muscle memory when it comes to gratefulness. We aim to grow in both our understanding and our practice of gratitude so that it becomes more characteristic of us. This is especially important during the Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of the greatest gift ever given.

But talking about gratefulness is also important because this is the time of year when we seem to be confronted with an increasing amount of brokenness.

My hope is that by the end of this series, you'll not only be more "gratefulness aware" but that you'll have found some new ways to put gratitude into practice that will stick with you in 2020. Perhaps gratitude can become a new habit for you.

This is our third week examining this issue. In week one, we looked at the goal. I tried to help you see that gratitude is really about your view of God. It takes a "thing" and uses it as a lens through which to rejoice in who God is. We looked at how ingratitude is the essence of idolatry and rebellion against God. And I challenged you to write down ten things each day—five in the morning and five in the evening—for which you could be thankful.

I challenge you with this concept: "When you see grace, say thanks." The response to that idea has been incredible. I've been so encouraged, and I hope you will continue to live grateful lives. And hopefully, you'll remember the five chairs where I asked you to evaluate the condition of your heart:

- Bitter
- Ungrateful
- Unaware
- Responsive
- Worshipful

Last week, Nate walked us through Psalm 103, helping us understand three stimulants for praising God. Who God is and what's he's done should create gratitude. The more we consider God and the more we remember what he's done, the more gratitude will characterize (or *should* characterize our lives).

This week, the single word title is "giving." I want to help you see that being grateful is designed to be something all-encompassing for the follower of Jesus. I'm going to suggest that a grateful perspective is supposed to be instinctive for the believer. Gratitude should be something like muscle memory. It should be something we practice intentionally.

The Bible calls us to a life of gratefulness. In our text today, it sounds like "give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:18).

When you see grace, say thanks—*always*.

### **What This Means**

Our text today, 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18, is part of Paul's concluding instructions to a church regarding how they are to live in the last days. Paul not only intends to give these believers hope as they consider the events surrounding the second coming of Jesus (see 1 Thess. 4:13-5:10), but he also wants them to know how they are to live during this pressure-filled season.

Take note of 1 Thessalonians 5:11—"Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

What follows in verses 12-21 (the end of the book) is instruction for the behaviors that should characterize the community. In other words, how should they live in the challenging days as they wait for the return of the Lord?

In verses 12-13, Paul affirms the importance of pastoral authority. He tells them, “Listen to your spiritual leaders.” What’s more, they are to be at peace with one another. He tells them to “get along.”

And then he lists a series of instructions:

**Admonish the idle** (v. 14) – Some may have taken up a life of leisure anticipating the Lord’s return

**Encourage the fainthearted** (v. 14) – Some were facing persecution and discouragement. They needed to be reminded about the truth undergirding their lives.

**Help the weak** (v. 14) – Other believers were new in the faith or they were stuck in the past (see Rom. 14). They may have been looking for security in their old, legalistic ways. Paul wanted these people to be helped.

**Be patient with them all** (v. 14) – As is common with Paul, he regularly encourages pastors and leaders to exercise patience with everyone

**Repay no one evil for evil** (v. 15) – In the face of opposition, they were not to take revenge but to keep doing good to another and everyone

**Rejoice always** (v. 16) – Their church was to be marked by a gospel-centered joyfulness that characterized them in every season – even the hard ones.

**Pray without ceasing** (v. 16) – a relentless prayer posture was an essential part of this community

The final command that Paul gives before connecting this entire list to the will of God is to “give thanks in all circumstances.”

Guess what word Paul uses here? It’s the same word that we examined on the first Sunday: eucharisteo. Hopefully, you’ll remember that it means “good-grace.” I defined it for you as calling God’s grace “good.”

See “grace,” say thanks.

In this context, the word is a present, active, imperative. That means something important:

**It’s a command** – When God’s grace and our need are understood, it is right and moral to say “thanks.” Two weeks ago, we looked at the Garden of Eden and Romans 1 where I showed you that a lack of gratitude is idolatry. We either make the mistake of disconnecting the gift from the giver, worshipping an object instead of God. Or we live as if we deserve what we have received.

**It's a lifestyle** – The tense of the verb indicates that this is to be practiced all the time. And just to make that clear, Paul says “in all circumstances.” Paul wants the church to see life through a lens of grace that leads back to the sovereignty of God.

This is why gratefulness is so important. It's why Paul would say that we need to practice it in all circumstances. Gratitude is a way that I connect my life to God's plan.

When I'm thankful, I'm saying something really important—and deeply theological— about who God is and who I am.

That's one of the reasons there were “thank offerings” in the Old Testament. The people would gather in the temple, offer sacrifices, and express their gratitude to God. They might read Psalm 107:21-22,

*“Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!  
And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of his deeds in songs of joy!”*

The sacrifices were not for God. He's not some insecure deity who needs flattery or praise in order to survive. The offering of thanksgiving was for the people! They needed the regular rhythm of rehearsing what God did for them. Commands for gratitude were for their good, not God's.

This is why we instituted the regular gathering of God's people on the Lord's day. We gather because God commanded us not to neglect the assembling together, especially as the end draws near (Heb. 10:25). Why do we sing and take the Lord's supper (eucharist in some traditions)? Because we need a regular reminder as to why we should be thankful.

We need to develop the discipline, the habit, the structure of eucharisto. We need to see the grace of God on display through our Sunday gathering. When we read the word and say, “thanks be to God,” we need to recognize that this Bible in my hand is a great gift from God. It tells me what I need to know and how to live. When we sing songs together, it helps remind us that our beliefs are true. And when we leave, we ought not just ask, “What did I get out of the service?” We should ask ourselves, “Where did I see receive God's grace?”

Developing the habit of gratitude personally and corporately is vital. There's an interesting and concerning trend around the country. People are attending worship services less frequently. It used to be that someone would identify with a church based upon their attendance two to three times per month. But that has dropped now to only one time per month. Just think of that—of the six thousand hours of non-sleeping hours in a year, once a month would amount to only 840 minutes for the entire year.

I'm not sharing this with you to guilt you into coming to church. I'm just telling you that if you are a follower of Jesus, you need the regular gathering of God's people to reorient your mind and heart toward God's grace. You need regular reminders and consistent rhythms that reinforce gratitude.

Otherwise, as we'll see next week, the bias of your heart and perspective is going to go south. Gratitude is a commanded lifestyle that is rooted in the gospel.

## What It Looks Like

Now let me try to put some handles on this. What does it look like to “give thanks in all circumstances”? I’d like to suggest that the habit and practice of gratitude involves saying three things: (1) you’re the giver, (2) you’re in control, and (3) you’ve provided.

All of these, of course, have their roots in the gospel. This is where all gratitude begins. The offering of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ brings together God’s gift, his control, and his provision. The gospel makes people grateful because they see the graciousness, the sovereignty, and the sufficiency of Jesus. You won’t find someone more loving, more in-charge, or more life-changing.

But what specifically does gratitude say?

**You’re the giver** – We’ve already established this from two weeks ago. But at a very basic level, the habit of gratitude connects what we receive to the one who gave it.

*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 (Col. 3:16–17 ESV).*

Gratitude anchors our lives and the gifts we receive in the sovereignty of God.

**You’re in control** – Another expression of gratefulness occurs when life is hard. When Paul says “in all circumstances,” he surely has difficulties in mind. The true test of gratitude is not merely if you acknowledge God’s grace in the good things. It is really tested when what you receive doesn’t feel or seem like it’s very good.

*“[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).*

It seems there were challenging circumstances that might breed anxiety. There were things to pray about. And yet, Paul says that their requests are to be made known to God “with thanksgiving.” Why add that? Because it reinforces that hard circumstances are still under the control of a sovereign God.

Gratitude is not only expressing thanksgiving for the good gifts but also for the hard things that part of God’s good plan for our lives.

**You’ve provided** – Gratitude also needs to be expressed in view of what God has provided. You could think of this as contentment or satisfaction in God’s supply. In my study of the subject of gratitude, I was surprised by these two texts in Ephesians:

*“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph. 5:3–4).*

Notice that part of the solution to immoral actions and filthy talking is thanksgiving.

*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18–20).*

Rather than being drunk with wine, we are to be filled with the Spirit, singing and give thanks to God.

And when I read these texts, I thought of Proverbs 5, which talks about how delighting in one's wife and being intoxicated with her love serves as a strategy in fighting against sexual temptation. Gratitude for the spouse that God gave you or celebrating the beauty of marriage serves to reinforce the wise provision of God.

Here's how the NIV renders it: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5 NIV).

You see, a lack of gratitude for what you've been given can easily lead to other sin issues. Gratefulness, therefore, is not just the right thing to do, it's actually protective of your heart and even your morality.

### **How to Do It?**

What does it practically look like to practice gratitude in all circumstances? Here are a few practical steps:

**Celebrate** – Find ways to celebrate and mark the grace in your life. Maybe you need to continue the sticky-note challenge. Or increase the amount of time you spend thanking God in your prayers.

**Lament** – When life is hard don't stop praying. Instead, use the language of lament to honestly talk to God about your struggles, questions, and sorrows. But don't stop there. Let lament lead you to renew your trust and gratitude in who God is.

**Give** – While this isn't a message on generosity, I believe that the regular discipline of joyful generosity is part of the habit of thankfulness. Grateful people love to give. And givers become grateful. The solution to covetousness is not thinking less about what you don't have; it's giving away what you already possess.

**Obey** – The practice of expressing gratitude fuels obedience. Too many people find self-centered, stingy reasons to not obey what God wants them to do. But people who are motivated out of gratitude for the grace of God find obedience a delight, not drudgery.

Is gratefulness like muscle memory for you? Or do you find yourself have to strain in making it work? The Bible calls believers to follow Jesus by making gratefulness a habit of the heart.

When you see grace, say "thanks" – always.

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