

The Attitude of Gratitude

Imagine a Christian virtue, which if active in your life, would drive away depression, discontent and worry in one fell swoop. Imagine that this virtue would not only cleanse away the dark sins of murmuring and unhappiness, but bring the opposite – contentment, joy, peace and hope.

This sounds like a pretty amazing virtue if it exists – to not only flatten and dispel numerous evils, but to replace them with good as well. The glad news is such a virtue does exist – it is called gratitude.

Gratitude is thankfulness. Too many Christians regard thankfulness like an optional extra in the Christian life – like the icing on the cake – nice, but not necessary. For them, talking about gratitude is like talking about having a pleasant expression on your face, or like lecturing on how we ought to be cheerful and easy-going. They see gratitude as a part of the Christian life, but really quite low down on the priority list.

However, the Bible stands in stark contrast to this thinking. As far as the Bible is concerned, gratitude is a command to be obeyed. Thankfulness is part of the revealed will of God for a believer. Satisfied contentment in God, manifested by gratitude towards Him, is expected of a believer.

In contrast to that, God condemns and is very displeased with the unthankful. Those who are unthankful are in fact tempting God, as the Israelites did with their unthankfulness. This is no optional extra in the Christian life. This is no little positive mindset attitude which we can brush aside. Gratitude is one of the marks of spiritual maturity.

What is gratitude? Why is it so important? Why does it mean so much to God? Why does it reflect spiritual growth to be a thankful person? Let's answer these questions as we examine the Bible's perspective on gratitude. To do that, we'll look at gratitude through a series of contrasts – what it is not, versus what it is.

1. While gratitude is commanded, it is a reaction

This might seem contradictory, but it is nevertheless true. We are told that joy is a fruit of the Spirit in **Galatians 5:22**, and yet we are commanded to rejoice in **Philippians 4:4**. This same phenomenon occurs a number of times in Scriptures – we are told to believe, yet faith is a gift; we are told to love, yet love is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

When we think of gratitude, we tend to think of the emotion of gladness. We think of receiving something which makes us happy, and we express thankfulness. And yet in Scripture, gratitude is commanded:

- **1 Thessalonians 5:18** – *"In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."*

- **Colossians 3:17** – *“And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.”*
- **Colossians 3:15** – *“And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.”*

Prayer is commanded in Scripture to be done with thanksgiving:

- **Colossians 4:3** – *“Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving.”*
- **Philippians 4:6** – *“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.”*
- **1 Timothy 2:1** – *“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men.”*

See, God expects us to see life from a completely different perspective – His. If we try to react gladly to negative circumstances, we will be hypocrites. But if we see all of life as a gracious gift from God to people who deserve hell, we will be grateful.

Gratitude is not reacting to life – picking out the things you like, and delighting in them. That is reactive – allowing life and circumstances to determine your joy and contentment. Gratitude instead is active – choosing to give thanks, because of, and in spite of, life’s circumstances. The root of thankfulness is actually submission. Submission is the decision of a repentant heart. It chooses to stop living life for self, under self-guidance, and for self’s glory. It gives over control to another.

Now a thankful person is one who has submitted themselves to God. This is not someone foolishly grinning at the negative things in life. Rather, it’s someone who submits to God’s wise choices for their life, and is grateful for them. They are grateful, if not for the actual circumstances, then for the fact that God is in control of them. They submit to God – bowing the knee and accepting all of life as part of the providential and wise hand of God.

See, we could not logically delight in things that are not delightful. That would mean we are dishonest. Nor could we honestly enjoy suffering, else it would, by definition, no longer be suffering. However, we can submit to God – and rejoice in Him. We can find delight in His plan.

Remember Paul and Silas? After having been beaten and placed in stocks in Philippi – they began to sing praises to God. Were they reacting to their circumstances – or acting upon their relationship to God? They were acting – choosing, deciding to submit to God. They chose to rejoice in the God of their circumstances. As they did that, no doubt a real and genuine joy sprung up.

In the midst of a trial, it sounds like salt on the wound to say, ‘be thankful.’ But really, giving thanks when things are negative is the acid test of whether or not we are submitted to God. If I can give thanks to God when things are bad, it shows I am truly one under God who receives good and bad with the submitted heart of a servant. Refusal to give thanks may show I was never in submission – I was simply trying to use God for my own ends. When things turn out poorly, my arrogance comes out – I am annoyed that God didn’t treat me the way I ‘deserve.’

2. Gratitude is not superficial happiness, it's joyful humility

Consider this illustration to see why the submissive humility of a servant is the real root of thankfulness. Imagine a child brought up with all of life's luxuries. He has lived in the finest of houses, with the best of food, and an endless array of little pamperings and entertainments that go with being born with a silver spoon in your mouth.

Now imagine another child who has literally been clothed in rags, whose shoes are open at the toes. His meals have been infrequent, inconsistent and never quite certain. His one-roomed house is lit only by the paraffin lamp of his mother. Let's compare the two. Do you think the first boy will be thankful for running water? We will be thankful for the fact that he has more than one pair of socks?

No. Why not? Because he is so used to his blessed status – he regards such things as a right. He expects them. He even complains if he has had the same meal twice in one week – because for him, variety of foods is expected – he regards it as his birthright. Now we move to the second child. We provide him with electricity, and he is delighted. We give him five pairs of second-hand clothes, and his face lights up with joy. We give him a little toy, and he is enthralled.

Why? Because in his life, he never began to regard any of those things as an expectation. His circumstances were so meagre, that the tiniest thing will be met with the surprised joy of a thankful heart. The rich boy would never regard a microwave oven as something to be thankful for, because for him, it is normal. As far as he is concerned, he deserves it – though he might never have thought of it. But for the poor boy, the idea of a warm meal would be a wide-eyed wonder.

What we are trying to illustrate is the difference between the proud heart which regards itself as deserving of much, and is therefore unthankful, and the humble heart, which has no expectations, and is therefore thankful. See, if I regard myself as a pretty great guy, who ought to receive the best in life – when I receive the best in life, it will be nothing less than normal in my eyes – it's what I expected.

However, if I regard myself as deserving of very little or nothing, even the smallest things in life become icing on the cake. Take it a step further: if I realise I deserve hell, and instead am receiving salvation, eternal life, a relationship with Christ, plus some earthly benefits and joy here – my gratitude is doubled. Your gratitude is proportional to what you think you deserve.

The unthankful are simply proud people exalted in their own eyes. Unthankfulness in my heart is when I am so great in my own eyes, that I expect the world to lay its presents at the feet of King Self, and arrogantly spurn gifts that do not meet my expectations. When people or circumstances fail to meet my proud expectations of what I deserve – I become unhappy and unthankful. I grumble and murmur, because I feel I am being mistreated.

Thankfulness is not about being happy about what pleases you – it's about being humble. When you are proud, it becomes pretty impossible to finally be pleased. *"Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied,"* says **Proverbs 27:20**.

The proud heart is forever moving the goal post of its own contentment. Since it believes it deserves so much, and deserves more than it is getting – thankfulness will always be a receding mirage to the proud heart. But the humble heart finds an inexhaustible fountain of things to be thankful for – simply because the heart is in submission to God. It has embraced reality: 'I am a servant of God, who deserves hell. Just look at all I have now by His kind hand.'

Sometimes we simply do not meditate of the fact that, before salvation, we were God's enemies. We do not see that God has taken the very people who hated Him and His rule, delivered them from destruction, and then brought them into His own home, to eat from His table, and enjoy the inheritance of His Son at His own expense! What high treason against heaven, when such people mope around in mumbling discontent.

Interestingly, before Jesus cleansed 10 lepers of whom only one was thankful, He gave a parable on servanthood. He said that a slave does not get thanked for the things he does, nor does a master reward the slave for the things he is expected to do. In the same way, Jesus said we as Christians should not walk around with the haughty expectation that God must give us a pat on the back and gift us with all things.

Rather, we should regard ourselves as unprofitable servants, who are simply doing our duty. Because from there, we will be so surprised and amazed at the generosity and kindness of our good Master.

It's not that gratitude does not have emotions. Of course it does. Like love – love has emotion. But love begins with an act of the will, a decision, a choice to sacrifice for another. Likewise, gratitude is a decision to submit to God. It is the honest heart of the humble – one who sees themselves as God sees them. From there, they experience the glad emotions that constitute thankfulness.

3. Thankfulness is not situational, it's relational

Thankfulness finds its power and source not in circumstances, but in the Person of God. We give thanks because, however negative life may be, God Himself remains the greatest reality of all – worth being thankful for in spite of all else. Scripture is clear that giving gratitude must have God both as the motive and the means. **Ephesians 5** speaks of Christians:

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

Ephesians 5:19-21

This command comes after Paul has told us we are to be filled with the Spirit. That simply means we must come under the control of the Spirit. We come under His influence; we submit to His leading. As we empty ourselves of self, and seek His empowerment – His will – He controls us. It is not that we get more of Him, but that He gets more of us, as we submit to Him.

The results of living this submissive way are mentioned in the following verses – firstly, praise is seen in verse 19, gratitude is seen in verse 20, and submission in verse 21. A thankful heart comes from being in fellowship with God. Only the heart that has humbled itself under God – allowing God to be God – and taken its place as a servant and a creature, can have the power and perspective to give thanks.

The Spirit enables the humble heart and the clear and wise mind that now sees things as they are. We find this thought echoed in **Hebrews 13:15**: *“By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name.”* He is the source of our gratitude.

See, contentment is actually the heart that believes: ‘God is enough.’ That’s the source of contentment. It’s a submitted and loving heart that has come to see that the Person of God is actually more than enough to meet every need in the human heart. It has come to rest in the fact that God supplies the needs of His children. **Hebrews 13:5** puts it well:

Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.’

Hebrews 13:5

That’s pretty simple. We could paraphrase it this way: stop wishing you had things that you don’t have, and realise that you have more than enough in God, who will never leave you. That’s contentment – the satisfaction based on a Person, not on the situation. It’s for this reason that Paul could say:

Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Philippians 4:11-13

Paul said the situation is actually irrelevant. Whether meagre or much, in abounding or abasement – I have learned to be content. Notice, it doesn’t say ‘I found myself to be content’ but *“I have learned.”* It was a decision; it was an act of humility. And then notice – how and why? *“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”* The Person and power of Christ is the motive and means behind God-pleasing contentment and satisfaction.

It is because of our slothful attitudes to the Word and the Christian life that we have such a shallow view of God. We rely on second-hand accounts of God, we read 5-minute devotionals, we pray 2-minute prayers – and we wonder why talk about God’s character satisfying us

sounds theoretical and impractical. To the one truly meditating on the goodness of God, His attributes are as profoundly practical and applicable to the heart as can be. But that you have to find out for yourself.

"O taste and see that the Lord is good," says the Psalmist (**Psalm 34:8**). If you are hoping you'll find joy and thanksgiving in your circumstances – I wish you luck. You will need it! For those of us who do not believe in luck, we can turn to the very character of God for joy.

When people disappoint, we meditate on the faithfulness of God. When things are unfair, we meditate on the justice of God. When situations seem negative, we meditate on the sovereignty of God. When life seems bitter, we meditate on the goodness of God. When times are hard and tough, we meditate on the fact that God has never failed us yet. When human relationships disappoint, we meditate on the love of God.

We tend to thank God for what He has done, but the heart that truly spends time in His presence will move their gaze up from the benefits they receive to the very Person of God. We can give thanks primarily for Who God is.

Gratitude is also a habit. It is something a submitted heart learns to do continually. Sometimes, we need to simply teach ourselves the habit of counting our blessings. I heard it put this way once – if you want to give thanks, just think of the word 'thanks'. Each letter can stand for something to give thanks for.

- **T – Things:** Thank the Lord for all the things He gives you – from your meals to your microwave, from your coat to your dishwashing liquid, from your curtains to your education, from your job to your health. Thank the Lord for the things in your life that God has supplied to make it liveable, bearable and enjoyable.
- **H – Helpers:** Thank the Lord for all the helpers in your life. Parents, teachers, siblings, spouses, pastors, friends, relatives, managers. You are what you are today because of, to a large degree, the input that others had in your life. You have had helpers – people who assisted you spiritually, emotionally, financially. Thank God for loving you through those helpers.
- **A – Adversity:** Thank the Lord for the difficulties and trials in your life. Thank the Lord for strengthening you to become a more fruitful branch, for toughening you up to handle more. Privilege comes with responsibility, so when God strengthens you to handle more responsibility, it's because He wants us to experience more privileges as well.
- **N – Now:** Thank God for now – for giving you another day, another moment to breathe and enjoy life. Thank God for another opportunity to serve Him. A.W. Tozer said – we have such a short time to prepare for such a long time. Thank God for extending your short time – for giving you another day, another chance to bring glory back to Him, to sow things of an eternal nature.
- **K – Kindnesses:** Thank God for all the kindnesses God has shown you in life – from warm water to good health, from the ability to read and write, to beautiful weather. Thank Him for showing you kindness in the love others have shown you, in the small and large blessings He piles on you every day.

- **S - Salvation:** Thank the Lord that He saved you from an eternal hell, and crowned you with eternal life. Thank Him for an inheritance reserved in Heaven for you. Thank Him for going through what He did to purchase such a matchless gift.

Sometimes we need to simply spend more time thanking God for the things He has given us, for the helpers He has given us, for the adversity He has given us, for the now, for kindnesses and for His salvation.

How do you feel when someone is unthankful for something you do for them? Honestly, we are often very bewildered at how someone can take a blessing from our hands without so much as politely thanking us. Well, this is what we do to God on a daily basis. Every day, He crowns us with life and blessings, and all too often, we are one of the nine lepers that go on their merry way – happy to have been blessed by the Lord, but not returning to thank Him.

Gratitude is an attitude

It's an act of the will – a submissive heart that cheerfully accepts God's sovereign hand over all of life. It's not happiness – it's humility. It's a heart that accurately sees itself as a hell-deserving sinner, but standing instead clothed with the white robe of Christ's righteousness, serving in the palace of the king. Its humility regards everything more than punishment in hell as being better than what it deserved, and therefore – it can truly give thanks for everything.

And gratitude is not situational – it is relational. Circumstances may change, but Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. We find the means and the motive to give thanks in the precious Person of our God. Whatever the situation, we can find cause to give thanks, since we have a relationship with God Himself through His Son Jesus Christ.

Gratitude is an attitude – the attitude of a believer growing in Christ. What does your thankfulness thermometer read? Let us submit to God, humble ourselves under Him, and enjoy the good fruits of the grace of gratitude.