

The Practice of Gratitude
Hamel
Grateful
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Dan
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Welcome everyone! So great to be with you today. I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving, and that even though it probably was not like holidays in the past, you were still able to spend some quality time with family and friends. The Thanksgiving holiday runs perfectly parallel with what we have been talking about all month long here at The Creek in our series called *Grateful*. Week one we talked about the power of gratitude, and we learned how important thankfulness is in the Bible – more than 100 different verses command us to be grateful. Week two we talked about the enemies of gratitude, and how if we want to be grateful people we have to fight against greed, entitlement, comparison and foolishness. Last week we talked about how challenging it can be to be grateful in the midst of the pain and loss we experience in this world, but how we can be honest with the full weight of our loss and still place our confidence in the goodness of God, chose to be joyful, and surround ourselves with a community to help us find strength the encouragement in our seasons of greatest need.

Today, we are going to talk about the practice of gratitude – the tangible, practical steps we can take to foster a heart and spirit of thankfulness in our lives. And what I want us all to realize is that gratitude is something that we can cultivate, that we can grow in, that we can intentionally, purposefully pursue. We see an example of this in Philippians 4:11-12: “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” Did you see what Paul said there? Twice he noted that he has learned how to be content. We aren’t born content. It’s not like when we turn 18 and can vote and 21 and can drink that we hit a magic age and all of a sudden are content. It’s something we learn. The same is true for gratitude. Contentment and gratitude overlap like on a Venn diagram. Even for those of us who don’t find gratitude to come naturally or easily, it is absolutely something that we can learn, that we can grow in, that we can develop through practice.

Let me give you a couple examples from the Bible and a couple examples from today. David practiced with his sling for years during his work as a shepherd, which is what allowed him to stand before a giant with confidence. Daniel committed himself to the practice, the rhythm, the discipline of praying three times a day for decades of his life, which is what allowed him with conviction to go to his window and pray for everyone to see, even when the king said anyone who prayed would be thrown into a den with lions. We see this in the world of sports. Phil Michelson is one of the best to ever play the game. He’s been a pro for more than 20 years, won 44 events, and five major championships. He has won about 100 million dollars on the golf course and been paid about a ½ billion dollars to endorse golf products. Do you know how he ends every single golf round? He goes to a putting green, and he won’t leave until he makes 100 consecutive putts from three feet away. People used to ask him, “Phil, you are one of the best in the world, why are you practicing a three-foot putt?” He’d answer, “That’s how I became one of the best in the world, by practicing a three-foot putt!”

Let me give you one more example think about American history. During the civil rights era in the US, African Americans would train themselves before going to sit-ins. They would set up mock restaurants and have their friends insult them, threaten to beat them, even spit on them, so that they would have the wherewithal, during the actual sit-ins, to withstand whatever people threw their way.

If we want to be grateful people, we have to embrace the practice of giving thanks! We have to train ourselves to be grateful people. We have to give thanks again and again and again. One of the people I know who does this the best is Gary Johnson, our former senior minister of 30 years. I asked him if he could join us today, but he was already scheduled to preach somewhere else, so I got on a zoom call with him early this week. Take a look. (Please view the video recording of this sermon to see Dan's interview with Gary.)

If we want to grow in being grateful, we have to be intentional. I love what his mom would tell him to do: look for the good things and give thanks! Listen to this poem by Jason Leman:

It was spring,
But it was summer I wanted,
The warm days,
And the great outdoors.
It was summer,
But it was fall I wanted,
The colorful leaves,
And the cool, dry air.
It was fall,
But it was winter I wanted,
The beautiful snow,
And the joy of the holiday season.
It was winter,
But it was spring I wanted,
The warmth,
And the blossoming of nature.
I was a child,
But it was adulthood I wanted,
The freedom,
And the respect.
I was 20,
But it was 30 I wanted,
To be mature,
And sophisticated.
I was middle-aged,
But it was 20 I wanted,
The youth,
And the free spirit.
I was retired,
But it was middle age I wanted,

The presence of mind,
Without limitations.
My life was over.
But I never got what I wanted.

That is not the poem we want to write, that is not the song we want to sing! We want to be grateful people who are aware of all we have, and praise God right where we are at. Listen to how the catholic priest Brennan Manning has put it: “I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, nor between Republicans and Democrats. The real difference is between the aware and the unaware. When somebody is aware of that love – the same love that the Father has for Jesus – that person is just spontaneously grateful. Cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of the interior life, and the byproduct of gratitude is joy. We're not joyful and then become grateful – we're grateful, and that makes us joyful.” Did you pick up on that one line, “cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of the interior life?” Don't you want that to be said of you?

Nowhere will you see that better than visiting a third world country. If you ever sign up with us to take a trip to Kenya, to India, to Haiti, to Cambodia, you will meet people who live on 1-2 dollars a day, you will meet people who live in huts, sometimes without running water and electricity, and you will also meet some of the most joyful people you'll ever encounter in your life. Every time people come back and say, “I don't get it. They have so little. How could they have so much joy?” They're not focused on what they *don't* have, they are grateful for what they *do* have. And their joy overflows.

One of the ways Keren and I have tried to practice gratitude and cultivate thankfulness in our home is through a Thanksgiving tree, which we put up in our house in October. Now, you might look at this and say, “Dan, that's called a Christmas tree...and you are supposed to put that up in December.” Hear me out. This tree is a bit more slender than your average Christmas tree, and instead of the living room, we have this in the foyer of our house, it's the first thing you see when you walk in. We have pumpkins and other fall decor on it for decorations, and every one of the ornaments, when guests come over to our house, we ask them to pick up a marker and write something they are thankful for, and then put it back on the tree. So from October all the way until January, every time we walk into our house we get to see, and every person who walks into our house gets to see, dozens of expressions of what we are thankful for, and what our community is thankful for. We are trying to build gratitude into the liturgy of our family. Giving thanks is something we do. Giving thanks is something we celebrate!

I know families with older kids, as they sit down for dinner, every person goes around the table and says something they are thankful for that day. Every single day they practice giving thanks as a family! We tried that with Hudson for a few nights, but he kept saying candy over and over and over again...so we decided to wait until he was older than one.

Expressing thankfulness makes an enormous difference both in the life of the person who vocalizes the gratitude, as well as in the life of the person who receives the gratitude. I'm going to give you a bit of a challenge, and you get to decide what level you participate at. This will be

like a chose your own adventure book: entry level challenge, everyone should be able to accept. A mid-level challenge that requires a little more work. And a high-bar challenge for those who want to roll up their sleeves and really dive into the deep end. Here's the challenge: I want you to think through people in your life: spouse, kids, parents, co-workers, your boss, your employees, neighbors, your life group members...and commit to expressing your gratitude to them. Now, here is where the three levels come into play. Entry level, all you have to do is say thank you to one person, and you are done. Phone call, text, email, notecard, you decide the method, but say thank you to one person, and see the impact. Middle level: do this every single day this upcoming week. So that is seven thank you messages you get to send. Highest level: every day for this upcoming month. December 1st is on Tuesday, and the challenge is to find an intentional, purposeful way to say thank you to someone in your life every day for the entire month.

When you do this, pay attention, see the power that gratitude has on your own life, and on your relationship with the person you express gratitude to. The most important person we can say thank you to is God. And in our remaining minutes, I want to talk about four specific things we should express gratitude to God for every day.

First, life. We should thank God that we are alive! Look at what we read in Psalm 8:3-4: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" Look around. Look at the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars. This galaxy, our universe, which is 93 billion lightyears wide. Think about that. Light speed is so fast that, if you were traveling at light speed, you could travel around the equator of the earth 7.5 times in a single second...if you could travel that fast, it would still take you 93 billion years to go from one side of our universe to the next. And in the midst of this universe, you exist. Think about that! No one like you has ever existed before, and no one like you will ever exist again. God created *you* and gave *you* life. Thank him for that.

Second, thank God for creation. Romans 1:20 tells us: "For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. Our universe is incredible! And everywhere we look we can see the fingerprints of God. From the roar of a waterfall, to the joy of holding a little puppy, from the purple, pinks, orange and gold sunsets, to biting into the perfect watermelon in the middle of summer, from the full array of colors in Brown County in the fall to the perpetual ocean tide crashing against white sand beaches. Can you imagine a more beautiful, diverse, expansive, majestic world in which to live and enjoy? This is God's gift to us. Thank him for that.

Third, thank God for his provision. Psalm 103:2 says: "Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Let's not forget all that God has done for us, let's thank him for it. When was the last time you thanked God for a remote control? These things didn't exist 50 years ago. You had to get up off your couch to change the channel! Can you imagine that? When was the last time you thanked God for Blue Bell ice cream? Someone figured how to get that out of a cow, whip it up, put it in a freezer, and turn it into perfection in your mouth! Do we remember to thank God for a bed to sleep on, for sheets and comforters and pillows, or the thermostat in our

house, that we can literally make it any temperature we want? When was the last time you thanked God for deodorant? Anyone with middle school aged kids? It's a life saver if you can convince them to wear it! We don't want to take the provisions of life for granted. Big or small, we want to thank God.

How about this last one: thank God for salvation. 1 Peter 2:22-24, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. The holy and blameless one became broken, so that the broken ones might become holy and spotless." All throughout the day, do you tell him thank you for that?! Psalm 32:1-2, "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit." There is no greater gift that we could ever be given than the gift our salvation, our sins are covered, all by the power of his great grace.

Friends, we want to be a grateful people. Through and through, to our core, *grateful*. Tomorrow, or all throughout this week, or all next month...we are going to tell the people in our lives thank you, and we are going to begin a continual heart of gratitude day in and day out to God, because of who he is, and because of all he has done for us.