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Thanksgiving

A good starting point for our study of the first of these activities, thanksgiving, is provided by Hebrews 12:28:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

There is a very remarkable difference between this and the New International Version. Where the New King James says, 'Let us have grace,' the NIV says, 'Let us be thankful.' Each of these, however, is a correct translation, because in Greek to have grace – and the key word is charis – is to say, 'thank you'. (Interestingly, the modern Greek word for 'thank you' is eucharisto, which is directly related to charis, grace.) Thus, there is a direct connection between grace and thankfulness. An unthankful person is a person out of the grace of God. You cannot be unthankful and be in the grace of God.

Three other modern languages also bring this out. In French, *grâce à Dieu* means 'thanks to God'. The word *grâce* is spelled exactly as we spell the English word. In Italian, the word for 'thank you' is *grazie*, directly related once again to grace. And in Spanish, *gracias*. You can see, then, that these three Romance languages (languages based on Latin) all retain the direct connection between grace and thankfulness.

This is a tremendously important point: when we are unthankful, we are out of the grace of God. We cannot enjoy God's grace without being thankful. Nor can we separate thankfulness from the grace of God. And whether we say, 'Let us be thankful,' or, 'Let us have grace,' we are really saying the same thing.

Here are four statements about thankfulness – requirements, really – from four different epistles of Paul. Starting with Colossians 3:15:

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

That is not a suggestion; it is a command: Be thankful. Paul goes on in verses 16–17:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

In all that we do we need to be guided by two principles: doing it 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' and 'giving thanks to God through Him'. That sets a wonderful boundary! Young people sometimes ask, 'Is it all right for me to do this or that?' I reply, 'If you can do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through Him, it's all right. If you can't, it's not.' That sets the limit to what we are free to do.

Giving thanks, then, is not an option: it is a command.

Second, in Ephesians 5:18, Paul speaks about what it means to be filled continually with the Holy Spirit:

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.

Isn't it remarkable how much the Church has focused on the negative and ignored the positive? Everybody knows you should not be drunk with wine, but how many know you should be filled with the Spirit?

And what is the result of being filled with the Spirit? Verse 19 tells us:

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

When you are full of the Holy Spirit, you will continually give God thanks. In fact, you can measure the fullness of the Spirit within you partly by that very criterion – how much time you spend giving God thanks. When you cease to do so, it is one sure indication you are beginning to leak out.

Paul's third statement (or requirement) about thankfulness is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, some of the shortest verses in the New Testament, but filled with powerful truths:

Rejoice always...

Very simple to say, isn't it? It takes more grace to do it!

... pray without ceasing...

Never come to the end of praying. You do not have to pray all the time, but never, on the other hand, say, 'Now I'm finished praying.' It was said of Smith Wigglesworth, I believe, that he never prayed more than half an hour at a time but he never went half an hour without praying. That is a good picture of what it means to pray without ceasing.

The last of Paul's pithy requirements from 1 Thessalonians 5:

... in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

What is the will of God in Christ Jesus? To give thanks in everything. So if you are not giving thanks, as we have already seen, you are actually out of the will of God.

I have talked to many Christian workers who were in the right place, doing the right job, but still felt out of the will of God. It was not because of the place or the job; it was because they had ceased to be continually thankful. So remember, the moment you cease to be thankful, you are out of the will of God – not necessarily for what you are doing, but because you are not responding appropriately to God's goodness.

In Philippians 4:6 we come to the fourth of Paul's requirements regarding thankfulness:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God.

Never bring a request to God without thanksgiving.

Years ago the journals of John Wesley tremendously impressed me. I always remember his comment on this verse. From the phrase, 'In everything by prayer and supplication,' Wesley isolated three words, *everything by prayer*, and said, 'I am persuaded God does everything by prayer and nothing without it,' I believe this is a basic truth.

Paul is saying, moreover, 'Whatever request you have, bring it with thanksgiving.'

Now that we have looked at four separate exhortations of the apostle Paul concerning thankfulness, let us consider two important functions that it accomplishes.

First, thankfulness provides access to God. The best place to see this is in Psalm 100, a familiar and very beautiful psalm. Talking about coming into the house of God, the psalmist writes in the fourth verse:

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,

And into His courts with praise.

Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.

Notice there are two stages of access to God. The first is through the gates; the second is through His courts. The gates give you admission to the courts, and the courts give you access to the actual house of God. But you cannot enter except by the prescribed route – 'into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise'. I am convinced that a person gains no close access to God unless he or she comes this prescribed way – with thanksgiving and praise.



For further study we recommend the CD "Thankfulness" (#4070, \$8 INCL. P&H).

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Some of you may feel at times, despite your prayers, that you are a long way from God. Quite possibly the reason is that you are not approaching Him by the prescribed route. You can stand outside the courts and shout at God, and He will hear and have mercy on you. But you will not enjoy close access to the Father unless you come with thanksgiving and praise.

Some people may grumble, 'I don't have anything to thank God for. Things are going wrong. My life is in a state of turmoil. Why should I thank Him?' Well, the psalmist has given three reasons in verse 5 to thank God:

For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, And His truth endures to all generations.

No matter how we feel, no matter what our circumstances, three facts never change: the Lord is always good; His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endures to all generations. So we have three permanent, unchanging reasons for thanking God.

Don't focus on your feelings. Don't focus on your situation. Focus on these eternal, unchanging aspects of God's nature and of His dealings with us. Then you will find yourself thanking God ceaselessly.

Let us look at an illustration in the New Testament of the special access to God that thankfulness provides. Do you remember the ten lepers from Luke 17 who were not allowed to come near anybody? They had to shout continually, 'Unclean, unclean,' warning everybody to stay out of their way since their disease was so contagious.

Luke's account records that they lifted up their voices from a distance and shouted to Jesus, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' Jesus gave them a very simple reply: 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.'

Now, a person cleansed from leprosy had to present himself to the priest to receive a certificate declaring he was no longer infectious. So, by telling them to go and show themselves to the priest, Jesus was saying, 'By the time you get there, the priest will certify that you no longer have leprosy.' That, you see, is faith. Sometimes we are healed as we go. If we just stand still and say nothing has happened, nothing will happen.

Well, all ten were cleansed of leprosy; but only one – who happened to be a Samaritan, not a Jew – returned to give Jesus thanks. Jesus said:

'Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?'

Luke 17:17-18

Then he said to the man (according to the Greek), 'Your faith has saved you, go in peace.' It does not come out that clearly in the English translation that, although all ten lepers were cleansed, only the one who returned to give Jesus thanks was saved. Each of them had a physical healing but only the one who came back to offer thanks received the eternal spiritual healing of salvation. He

was the only one who came close to Jesus. You see, thanksgiving provides special access to God.

The second vitally important function of thanksgiving is that it unlocks the supernatural miracle power of God. I will offer two notable New Testament examples. The first of these is the feeding of the five thousand recorded in John 6. Jesus had a crowd of five thousand men (not including women and children) in front of Him, all of them hungry. His only resource was the lunch of a little boy—five small loaves and two fishes. But He said, 'Make the multitudes sit down; we're going to feed them.' And this is what transpired in verses 11 and 12 of John 6:

And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down, and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted. So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, 'Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.'

It is noteworthy that in this situation Jesus did not pray. He did not ask God to do a thing. All He did was thank God for what He had in His hand.

John must have been impressed by this because in verse 23, describing something that followed, he wrote:

. . . other boats came from Tiberias, near the place where they ate bread after the Lord had given thanks . . .

It had apparently been impressed upon John that the miracle was released not by some long prayer, but simply by Jesus giving thanks! I really believe that many times we miss out on the power of God simply because we do not release it by giving thanks.

A little later, in the eleventh chapter of John, we find a second example of this principle. As Jesus stood before the tomb of Lazarus who had been buried four days, He did not pray a long prayer. He said simply, 'Father, I thank you that You have heard Me.' That is all He said. Then He spoke to Lazarus – and out came Lazarus!

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I will say once again that unless we cultivate the habit of thanking God the way it is described here, we will miss out on much of the supernatural power of God. Such power is not necessarily released by long prayers. Most of the really powerful prayers in the Bible, in fact, are very short. (I think of Moses' prayer for Miriam when she was smitten with leprosy because of criticising her brother. All Moses said was, 'Lord, heal her.')

Quite the contrary, then. If we mix more thanksgiving with our petitions, our petitions may be shorter and actually more effective.

Before concluding our discussion of thankfulness, we need to look at the dark side to this truth, the opposite of being thankful. The Bible has a great deal to say about unthankfulness, but here are just three significant statements.

The first appears in Romans 1, where Paul, in a most masterly way, outlines the decline of the human race from the inherent knowledge of God to appalling wickedness. Romans 1 ends with one of the most horrible lists in the Bible of human degradation, misery and wickedness.

We might well ask ourselves: how is it that humanity could ever decline to that level? The answer is given in verse 21:

... Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful . . .

Paul thus describes the first two downward steps that lead into the dark pit described at the end of the chapter: first, the people did not glorify God as God; and second, they were not thankful.

Every time a person ceases to be thankful, he or she starts down a slippery path. Let me warn you: do not even start on that path because it is hard to turn and make your way back up again!

The second important biblical observation about unthankfulness appears in 2 Timothy 3 which contains another fearful list. It is interesting to compare it to the one in Romans 1, which is what I call the logical outworking of unthankfulness. 2 Timothy 3 is the historical outworking. What is humanity going to be like in the last days, at the close of the age? The apostle Paul gives us this picture, beginning in verse 1:

But know this, that in the last days, perilous times will come:

What will bring the perilous times? The decline of human character. Verse 2:

For men will be lovers of themselves [that is the root of the whole problem], lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy . . .

Where does the unthankful person find his place in the list? Next to the unholy. To be unthankful is to be unholy. You cannot be holy and unthankful. And thankfulness is a major step towards being holy.

What kind of conduct is the opposite of being thankful? The best Bible word, I think, is 'murmuring' – in more modern English, 'complaining'. Let me suggest that whenever we say anything, it is either positive or negative. Very few words are neutral. If we are not expressing gratitude, therefore, we will almost certainly end up murmuring and complaining. Do not be that kind of person!

Third and last, let us look at what Paul says about unthankfulness in 1 Corinthians 10:7–10. He is warning Christians against falling into the same errors Israel fell into after they were delivered out of Egypt:

And do not become idolaters, as were some of them . . . Nor let us commit sexual immorality . . . nor let us tempt Christ . . . nor complain [in KJV, murmur], as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

One warning against murmuring is found in Numbers 21. Israel became discouraged and impatient because of their long, wearisome journey. They began to murmur against God and Moses. God responded by sending fiery serpents among them, and the people began to die.

Take warning! Murmuring may expose you to fiery serpents. Their bite may not be physical, but it will inject all sorts of poison into your spirit.

We are faced, then, with two opposite possibilities: being thankful, which opens the way to God's presence and to His miracle-working power, or being a murmurer. Make up your mind. Set your will:

'I am going to be thankful. I am going to continue to find the scriptural reasons for being thankful. And I am going to practise thanking God all the time.'



This teaching is taken from the
Derek Prince book *"Thanksgiving, Praise and Worship."*

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