

Blessed Gratitude

1 Peter 1:3-5, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, 5:16-18

Series: Loving God and Loving Others (Summer 2020)

Preaching Date: June 21, 2020

Topic: Loving God and others with our hearts

Worship: Give Thanks

Key Sentence: Gratitude is the most basic reflex of love.

Outline:

I. To God, for God (1 Peter 1:3-5)

II. To God, to others, for others (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

III. To God, in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

1 Peter 1:3-5 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Blessed Gratitude

1 Peter 1:3-5, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, 5:16-18

True Story: A church group from North Carolina had traveled to the Caribbean on a mission trip. Their host took them to minister at a leper colony on the island of Tabago, and there they held a worship service. The people suffering from leprosy gathered and took their seats on the pews. The Carolinians led them in hymns. The pastor of the group, Jack Hinton, noticed that one woman was sitting on the back row, facing in the opposite direction. Jack said, “We have time for one more hymn. Does anyone have a favorite?” Now for the first time, the leprous woman on the back row turned around to face the front. Jack said, “I found myself staring into the most hideous face I had ever seen. She had no nose and no lips. Just bare teeth, like a skull.” As she turned, she raised her hand in the air. Except it wasn’t a hand. It was the bony end of her arm, just a nub. As poor Jack was trying to take this in, she spoke. “Could we sing ‘Count Your Many Blessings’?” That’s when the pastor lost it. He stumbled out of the pulpit and through the door into the yard, with tears in his eyes. Someone else stepped up and led the hymn and a friend walked outside and put his arm around Jack. “You’ll never be able to sing that song again, will you, Jack?” “Oh, yeah. I’ll sing it,” Jack said, “but not in the same way.”

The two greatest commandments are to love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. Each week this summer we’re looking at ways we can put these into practice with our heads, hands, and hearts. Last week we looked at apologetics, loving God and others by being prepared to make a defense for our hope, this faith we hold. Next week we’ll look at good works, our calling to love with our hands. This week we’re focusing on loving God and others with our hearts, from our hearts. But let me ask you this: do you think a thankless person, a person who never counts his or her many blessings, can truly love? Can you love without gratitude? I don’t think so. Gratitude is the most basic reflex of love, it is how we acknowledge blessing to the blesser.

A few years ago Nancy Leigh DeMoss wrote the book “Choosing Gratitude.” Early in the book she says “Where does gratitude rank on your list of Christian virtues? In an arsenal that’s supposed to include things like mountain-moving faith, radical obedience, patient long-suffering, and second-mile self-denial, for many, gratitude feels like an optional add-on. Nice if you can get it, but not all that critical. If in our mind there’s an A, B, and C of Christian character traits, gratitude likely rattles down to one of those lower rungs, down there with hospitality and cheerfulness and going to church on Sunday night. . .

Yet. . . this issue of gratitude is far more significant than its lightweight reputation would suggest. [It is] in reality a much weightier, much more powerful, much more necessary component to our Christian life. Try, for example, to sustain faith without gratitude and your faith will eventually forget the whole point of its faithfulness, hardening to a hollow, ineffective practice of religion” And of love, which is the goal of this series, DeMoss says “Try being a person who exudes and exhibits Christian love without gratitude and over time your love will crash hard on the sharp rocks of disappointment and disillusionment.”

If gratitude is the first reflex of love, we need to know how to put it into practice. This morning I want to think about three kinds of gratitude, and how each can be expressed in our daily lives. So we’ll start with gratitude to God himself, looking at 1 Peter 1:3-5. Then we’ll think about gratitude to God and to others for others, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3. Finally we’ll look at the hard discipline of gratitude to God in hard circumstances in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

We start with gratitude toward God. 1 Peter 1:3-5 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

Peter is writing to believers in churches scattered across Asia, those chosen by God but strangers or aliens in the world. He writes to encourage them in their walk of faith despite difficulties and hardships. But he doesn’t address hardship immediately. Instead he begins with this word of thanksgiving and praise. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The word “blessed” literally means to speak well of. It is sometimes translated praised, but could also be translated ‘thanked.’ It exalts God for his good works and his promises to us and however we translate it, it is clearly this reflex of gratitude by the recipients of God’s love. As Wayne Grudem says “Peter encourages his readers to praise God, a helpful remedy for hearts weighed down with discouragement because of suffering. He then lists the reasons for praise.”

The first reason is that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Neither of these elements appear in traditional Jewish blessings of the time. The recognition of God as our Father in heaven was rare before Jesus taught it. The recognition of Jesus as the Lord, another title for God, and as the Christ, the Messiah was the culminating truth of the Gospels. We thank God who is our Father because he loved us so much that he sent his Son Jesus to be both our rescuer and our Lord. This itself is enough to make gratitude to God a daily privilege.

But there is more. Peter says “According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again.” This is as Jesus told Nicodemus “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus explains that “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Those who believe are born for a second time, this time into eternal life. But what motivates God to rescue us this way? Peter says it’s “according to his great mercy.” The word mercy is one of the Greek words used to translate the Hebrew word *hesed*, or steadfast love. It is because of his unchanging love for us that he has caused us to be born again. It is not something we have done. So our praise and gratitude is a reflexive response to that love. If we don’t show gratitude when we see his sacrificial love for us, we may not really have seen it.

But there is more. Peter says we’ve been “born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” This hope is the eager, confident expectation of the life to come, the kingdom to come. By describing this hope as living Peter implies that it grows and increases and energizes us. As Phil Wickham says in a song we sometimes sing Jesus is our living hope because this hope is built on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrection is the great victory of the Gospel, the assurance that sin and death have been defeated. Furthermore, as Grudem says, “the resurrection of Christ from the dead secures for his people both resurrection bodies and spiritual life.” Ephesians 2 says “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

But there’s more to be grateful for, more love to respond to by loving back. Peter says we’ve been born again into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. Our inheritance is the believer's share in the heavenly kingdom, his or her future heavenly reward. This heavenly inheritance is 'imperishable', meaning that it is not subject to decay, unable to be worn out with the passage of time. Scripture uses this word of eternal realities: God himself, His word, and our resurrection bodies. This inheritance is also “undefiled” that is “unstained by sin.” Peter invites gratitude and praise for a promised eternity purified from sin and containing none of sin’s sorrows and consequences. This inheritance is also “unfading.” Unlike earthly wealth it will never wither, grow dim, or lose its glory. Finally, the inheritance is kept in heaven for you. The form of the verb “kept” indicates a completed past activity (by God) with results that are still continuing in the present: God himself has “stored up” this inheritance for believers and it continues to be held there. We’ve got a lot to look forward to and a lot to be thankful for.

This gratitude, the reflex of our hearts to the love of God poured out, stands in sharp contrast to the response of those in rebellion against his love. In Romans 1 the apostle Paul says “God’s invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” But those in rebellion, “although they knew God, did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” As Nancy Leigh DeMoss points out “the seemingly insignificant, innocuous matter of ingratitude turns out to be at the fountainhead of all the other evils listed in this chapter.” If we do not practice gratitude to God, our hearts become hardened to his love, our reflexes become dull, our love for Him grows cold.

But there’s more. Peter isn’t done. His readers may have been anxious about whether they would remain faithful in the persecution or suffering Peter describes in this letter. He assures them that they are people “who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Guarded means “kept safe, carefully watched,” Peter stresses that this is by God's power, yet it is also through faith as we trust in that power. Furthermore, the purpose of this guarding is so that we can receive the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Salvation, here, is not past justification or present sanctification but future full possession of all the blessings of our redemption. All of this is reason to say “Blessed, praised, thanked be God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He has poured his love on us in all these ways and our wholehearted love for him is seen in the reflex of gratitude. It’s how we love him back, as we count these blessings.

But there’s more. We are not only reflexively thankful to God, for his works, but we are thankful to others, for others, a reflex of love toward them. 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is also the opening of a letter, from Paul to the church at Thessalonica, a city in ancient Greece. Paul had visited the city on his second missionary journey and probably wrote the letter only a little later. He had received reports that this young church was suffering persecution, and had been concerned about them, but after sending Timothy to them and hearing his report, he was comforted and encouraged. Their faith continued to be strong despite their hardship. This opening reflects thanks for all that. “We give thanks to God always for all of you.” “We” is Paul, Timothy and Silas. They give thanks to God. They give thanks for others. It is very typical of Paul, forty to fifty times depending on how you count, to express his gratefulness to God. “I thank God for you.”

It's not "thank you," directly the way we might use it in polite conversation. In fact, though the experts say the word was used that way, the only places I could find direct person to person gratitude was Paul thanking Felix for the reforms he had instituted as procurator of Judea, and thanking Priscilla and Aquila because they risked their necks for his sake. So we might say that Paul abounded in thanksgiving to God but was not thankful to others. That's not the case. Most of Paul's prayers, including the one we're looking at, are what I call prayer reports. Paul reports to the people of Thessalonica that "we give thanks to God for you constantly in our prayers." But by reporting the prayers Paul is giving thanks to the Thessalonians for the things he's heard. I mean if someone hands us an unexpected hundred dollar gift, and we say "I thank God for your generosity," they would probably understand us as thanking them as well. In our culture it would be better to say "I thank you so much and I thank God for your generosity" but in Paul's culture reporting that you thanked God for what they did was thanking them. That's how it would be understood.

The Greek word for gratitude is eucharisteo, similar to eulogeo, blessing, in the first section, but more closely tied to thanksgiving. Eu-logeo means a good word. Eu-charistos means a good gift. It is built on the Greek word 'charis' which is the root of 'gift' or 'grace.' Spiritual gifts are 'charismata' but in Ephesians 2:8 you have been saved by 'charis,' 'grace'. So this is an exceptionally rich word, gratitude on steroids. What does Paul give thanks for? If we look across his letters we would say "many things," from gifts given to works done to concerns expressed. Paul is thankful to God for others, and thus to others, in every circumstance, but especially at the intersection of the practical and the spiritual. Paul says we give thanks to God for you "remembering . . . your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice the practical: their work, labor and steadfastness or endurance. Notice the spiritual sources of these practices, their faith, love and hope.

Paul thinks first of their work produced by faith. "Work" could be direct missionary work, acts of goodness toward others, or even their trust in Christ in the face of severe persecution. As Robert Thomas says in his commentary "Faith manifests itself on a very broad front, so 'work' should be left as general as possible." It overlaps with their labor prompted by love, but Thomas says the word labor has "a distinctive connotation of extraordinary effort." It is "the wearisome toil by which love expends itself." "So great is its concern that love does not stop with ordinary effort, but goes beyond the second mile for the sake of another." I like that. Steadfastness or endurance is the third visible fruit that evoked thanksgiving. This is an aggressive and courageous quality, excluding self-pity even when times are hard.

Roberts says “Endurance accepts the seemingly dreary "blind alleys" of Christian experience with persistent zeal. It . . . goes forward no matter how hopeless the situation.” Such endurance is possible only when one is “inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Notice the connection back to Peter. We’ve been born again into a living hope, and now our hope inspires our endurance.

So can you imagine giving thanks to God and to others for these kinds of things? I hope you can. “Thank you for all your work.” “Thank you for pouring yourself out for others.” “Thank you for putting up with difficulty with such a hopeful attitude.” It’s good to thank others. It’s also good to thank God when we see these things in the lives of others. Gratitude reflects back the love that others have shown, as well as their faith and their hope. But do we actually practice the kind of love called gratitude? Nancy Leigh DeMoss tells the story of William Stidger, “a middle-aged pastor, struggling like so many others through the heavy, leaden days of the Great Depression. Everywhere around him were the forlorn and downtrodden faces of men and women aching for the basics: a job, a decent meal, an ounce of security. One day while sitting around a table with a group of friends who were bemoaning the dire straits people found themselves in, even provoking some to consider taking their own lives, William made up his mind that he would choose to be thankful. Thankful to God and to the people in his life.

The first person who crept into his thoughts was an English teacher who had first inspired in him a love of literature and poetry, preparing him for his calling as a pastor and writer. He sat down that evening and composed a simple letter of thanks to her, dropping it in the mail the next morning. Only a few days later he received a feebly scrawled note. It started off, “My dear Willy,” - he hadn't been called that name in years – “I can't tell you how much your note meant. I am in my eighties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely, like the last leaf of autumn lingering behind. You'll be interested to know, that I taught in school for more than fifty years, and yours is the first note of appreciation I have ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning, and it cheered me as nothing has in many years.” Needless to say, such eloquent sentiments brought a lightness into William Stidger's chest that hadn't been there the day before, the kind of care free joy that had seemed almost nonexistent since the stock market crashed and took everything else with it.

Motivated by this response to his gratitude (“thankfulness is invigorating to recipients and givers alike” Nancy Leigh DeMoss says), Stidger thought of someone else, a kindly old retired bishop whose wife had passed away in recent months. This man who had often given William counsel and guidance, especially early in his ministry. Perhaps now was a good time to say thanks.

Again, only a couple of days passed between sending and receiving, as his thoughtful words inspired an immediate reply. The elderly bishop, said, "Your letter was so beautiful, so real, that as I sat reading it in my study, tears fell from my eyes, tears of gratitude. Before I realized what I was doing, I rose and called my wife's name to share it with her, forgetting she was gone. You'll never know how much your letter has warmed my spirit. I have been walking around in the glow all day long." That's what happens when we reflexively reflect the love others have shown us back into their lives.

But there's more. And this is the hard part. Gratitude is also to be expressed to God in all circumstances. This is the one we struggle with. The classic verses are in 1st Thessalonians 5: *Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Paul is nearly finished with the same letter we were just in. Summing up, he calls the Thessalonians to joy, to prayer and to gratitude. All three of them, all the time. And we want this. We want to be people who are joyful, connected to God in prayer and grateful in all things. Paul says this constant giving thanks is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. When you ask "what is God's will?" you are often thinking of decisions that need to be made or choices that lie before you. "Should I do this or should I do this?" But Scripture points us to simple obedience to God's revealed will as the way of walking into God's plan for us. What is God's will today? That you give thanks, no matter what circumstance you're in or difficulty you're facing.

But when life gets hard, either on the global scale of coronavirus or racial strife, or on the local scale of sickness, conflict, financial need, or losses, we may have trouble rejoicing. We may have trouble praying. We do have trouble giving thanks. We may barely be able to make ourselves cry out to God. As I said in the series on lament, I think crying out is where it begins. It's right and good for us to turn transparently to God in our pain. We don't have to shut our eyes to difficulty or losses. But lament is the prayer in pain that leads to trust. And giving thanks in these hard times is a reflex of trust as well as of love for God.

I like the way Paul weaves all this together in Philippians 4 "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." We take our requests, our anxiety, in prayer, with supplication, to God. That's lament. But we bring these things to him with thanksgiving. That's part of lament too, remembering who God is and what he has done and how much he loves us, that's the part of lament that leads to trust.

1st Thessalonians 5:18 simply adds that we do this in all circumstances. We don't, I believe, give thanks for all circumstances. Again, check the series on lament. But we give can give thanks in all circumstances. We give thanks for the good we know about God and the goodness we trust him to be working out. Look again at what Paul says in Philippians. As we lament before God, with thanksgiving, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." As we reflect God's love back to him with gratitude, we internalize an even greater appreciation of what we already have in Christ Jesus and this gives peace.

Gratitude is the reflexive response to God's eternal love. Nancy Leigh DeMoss tells the story of Martin Rinkart, a 17th century Lutheran pastor who served in the German town of Eilenberg during the Thirty Years' War. Being a walled city, Eilenberg found itself overrun with refugees and injured troops, inviting not only fear and overcrowding, but a deadly wave of disease and pestilence. Armies continued to march around its walls, leaving the people in hunger and want. The Rinkart home became a refuge for the sick and stranded. Though there was hardly enough for Martin to feed his own family, he ministered tirelessly to the needs of others around him, trying to match gaping need with God's care and compassion. When other pastors fled for safety, Martin stayed on, eventually conducting more than 4,500 funeral services, sometimes over as many as forty to fifty bodies at a time. One of them was his wife.

Yet at some point in such dire, disheartening circumstances, Martin composed a family grace to be said by his children, a hymn that is still sung today all across Germany at state occasions and national days of remembrance. When we sing these words in a comfortable Thanksgiving service, they seem picturesque and idyllic. But make no mistake: this joy-filled refrain wasn't birthed around Thanksgiving feasts or in the settled quiet of a country cottage. Rather, it was forged in pain and suffering and grief and death. "Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices. Who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

Gratitude is the most basic reflex of love for God and love for others, even in times of great need. May we become people of gratitude, to God and to others.