

The Importance of Being Thankful

*“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:18 *)*

The attitude with which we approach personal circumstances and events is a direct reflection of who we are inside. As Jesus said, “The mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45). This article aims to encourage active gratitude as a way of life.

We often don't appreciate what we have until we no longer have it, or it is threatened, for example, by sickness, accident, relationship breakdown, or a financial tragedy. Sometimes our lives are geared to such a pace that we do not have time to slow down and reflect. Equally, unless we develop a habit of thanksgiving we will demand more, assume more, and not have what someone has aptly called an “attitude of gratitude”.

Of all people, Christians need to be leading the way in being a grateful community. “Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story” (Psalm 107:2).

Grateful for Good Reasons

Let’s look at a few examples of things for which we ought to develop hearts of appreciation, starting (as Christians) with our recognition of God’s work in our lives.

1. God's Continued Unconditional Love for Us

The debate continues as to how much we should love ourselves, but the eternal truth is the God accepts us, loves us, every day, that He will never stop loving and caring for us. You cannot buy or earn God's love. Rejecting or refusing it does not make it less real. He loves the most unlovely. He looks into our hearts in a way that no one else does and loves us in spite of what He sees. He knows our motives, hears our complaints, and observes what we do when no one else is watching, but His love is undiminished. “His love endures forever” (Psalm 118). Be thankful that God loves us. Be thankful that He “demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Never lose sight that our efforts or opinions are not enough to save us; only the mercy of God can do that. We love Him, not because we are noble beings and motivated by good thoughts, but because He first loved us (1 John 4:19) and has given us eternal life in His Son.

2. God's Mercy and Intervention in our Lives

It is easy to become a Christian on auto pilot, going to church out of force of habit or to oblige others, reading the Bible automatically (or neglecting it altogether), praying mechanically, going through the motions on Sundays, nodding at the right time, saying 'Amen' at the appropriate moment, performing on cue without giving it much thought. We rarely stop to consider what we are doing. Even Communion, which is meant to be a time of reflection, including what the celebration is about, can become stale and predictable, if our minds drift to other things as we eat the bread and drink

the wine in commemoration of Jesus' sacrifice for us. Let's be grateful for all that God is and what he has done for us. I am so glad that He loves me and that He got involved in my life. I have been a Christian most of my life, and I can honestly say that, as the years have passed, He has never let me down; He has always been there; His faithfulness and love are undiminished.

3. *Amazing Creation*

"Stop and smell the roses." Look around you, at all the beautiful things God has made. When was the last time you sat on the beach and enjoyed looking out into the ocean, went camping and enjoyed the outdoors, savoured a delicious meal made from an array of herbs and spices, listened to a bird sing, a river flow, thunder roll, or a baby cry? I enjoy climbing the mountain near my home and looking across the valley to the range on the other side, which often has snow on its peaks during winter. All around us we see evidences of God's amazing creation (read Psalm 8). If you have ever watched the birth of a child you will have been amazed at the incredible wonder of creation. Be thankful for natural beauty all around you.

4. *Health*

Good health is a precious thing. I have had a couple of health scares, which have made me appreciate the value of physical well-being. However, we typically get out of bed in the morning and go through the day with barely a thought about the state of our health. If we reach a point where we need to take medications we may listen to our doctor and think about our health for a moment, but after that it all becomes perfunctory. If an ache occurs in an unexpected place, our stomach is upset, a headache turns into a migraine, and when a medical check-up reveals there is nothing to worry about we forget to be thankful for our health (like nine of the ten lepers Jesus healed – Luke 17:11-19). We act as though we believe we are immortal. But, think about it. We are surrounded by people with physical or mental health issues. Look at the man walking with a limp, the frail old lady who appears confused as she studies the bus timetable, the ambulance rushing by with its siren blaring, evidently going to the aid of someone in distress, the age range of people waiting in the emergency room at the local hospital. Let's be grateful for our health, for every new morning we wake up, for strength to face each new day (Deuteronomy 33:25b), because we still enjoy living, and can make it fruitful (Philippians 1:22).

5. *Our Leaders*

The Bible teaches that good leaders are God's gift to us. Most people are organised into societies, and functional societies need leadership. Imagine a community without basic services, like water, electricity, roads, schools, hospitals, employment offices, parks, sanitation, or garbage collection. When leadership fails anarchy ensues, because people are self-centred and grasp what they want. It is easy to criticize our leaders, but I believe most of them are motivated by genuine desires to make society better (even if they differ as to how to turn promises into reality). Thank God for sensible leaders (Proverbs 11:4; 16:12; 29:2, 4), who are not

highjacked by vested interests. In many countries, politicians are corrupt and business leaders follow their example. When I lived in Kenya I was often struck by the gleaming Anti-Corruption Commission near the city centre. Then I learned that corruption in Kenya is endemic. Good leadership boosts integrity, accountability and transparency (Romans 13:1-6). As Christians, let us lead the way in praying for our leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-4), by all means holding them to account for the games they sometimes play and for keeping their promises, but upholding the value of solid and honest leadership. That includes leadership in the workplace and the community (including our local church, Hebrews 13:7, 17). Be thankful for good leaders.

6. *Personal Freedoms*

We take for granted that we live in a free society, where we can go anywhere we please without a soldier or the secret police nabbing us and arbitrarily taking away our freedom. Most people who read this do not live with regimes that can target them unfairly if they step out of line. I have lived under military dictatorships in South America and Asia. In countries where it is difficult, even dangerous, sometimes illegal, for Christians to practice their faith. Where demonstrators opposing the government simply disappear. We are commanded to pray for those in authority so that “we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:2). Let us give thanks, and not take for granted the liberty we enjoy to think, to speak out, to come and go and live our lives as we wish.

7. *Friendships*

“One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24). God has invested us with community. Christians have the Body of Christ, in relationship, as an extended community. Good friendships are like a garden, which if watered and tended regularly thrive, but if neglected shrivel up and die. Imagine getting old and having no friends. Many do. We are to honour and celebrate our friends, because most people are selfish and the risk of being left alone is only a short step away. Someone has said that you can choose your friends but not your relatives. That is a selfish premise. Of all our friendships, we absolutely must tend those closest to us, our husbands or wives, parents and children. I believe God gives us our families (Psalm 68:6; Proverbs 18:22, 19:14b; Psalm 127:3), and that we have a life-long commitment to them. Imagine being left alone. It is sometimes good to be by ourselves for a season, but not permanently. We need others as well. The community under our rooves needs to be recognised and cherished, as do those in our wider circle. Thank God for our family and friends. Appreciate them. Look for ways to be a blessing to them.

8. *Our Skills and Talents*

I have met some very clever and famous people in my time. I have, however, come to the conclusion that we all have unique abilities, which are God-given. The temptation is to think that we are what we are because of what we have accomplished. Like the “self-made man who worshipped his creator” (himself). But

talents are gifts. We did not deserve them. Our parents may have encouraged them, been good mentors, encouraged us at school, paid for our skills to be developed (I recall the small fortune my parents paid for my sister and I to learn to play the piano), and we may have studied hard, paid attention, and passed examinations or an apprenticeship, but our abilities and knowledge should never become a source of arrogance. As David once declared, “God did it! He used me” (1 Chronicles 14:11 NLT). We are blessed with skills and wisdom to become all that God intended us to be, not to become proud of our personal achievements, live to serve ourselves or build up our reputations. The Bible says that Jesus “made himself of no reputation” (Philippians 2:7); He served others and died on the cross to bring us back to God, giving all that we could enjoy mercy. Someone once gave me a tray that says, “It’s hard to be humble when you are so great”. Doors open, not so that we can look great, but so that through them we might serve others.

9. *Material Possessions*

“I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread” (Psalm 37:25). Those of us who live in the West have riches most people in the world only dream about. A quarter of the world lives well, or is reasonably well off. A quarter live in poverty, enduring short, hard lives. The rest are in between. It is easy to live as though possessions, and more of them, are our right, that we are entitled to access (and to waste) resources because they are there for us, that when what we have runs out there is more available. When I was in Siberia recently I was struck by the fact that, up to the recent past, those who lived there survived only as long as spring followed snowy winter, as long as crops grew, as long as plague or enemies did not sweep through villages killing everyone. We enjoy heating in winter, air conditioning in summer, designer clothes to keep us warm and to wear each day. We do not have to hunt or gather, eking out an existence on the basis of what we find, or work punishing hours from the time we are ten years old, just to survive, as do millions. I have spent time in refugee camps in Africa and the Middle East and have seen what it is like when people have nothing. We tend to demand, insist on more and expect the government to make life abundant, because we pay taxes. We easily become jealous when others receive things we don’t. But there is only a heartbeat between us and our possessions. (Then, like the farmer in Jesus parable, who will get what we have prepared for ourselves? – Luke 12:20). Let’s not complain, but be thankful. We have so much.

10. *The Benefits of Living Today*

We need to be thankful for knowledge, education and the advances of modern science, that have enabled men and women to work hand in hand with the Creator to find solutions to our needs, to produce better crops, to live longer, safe from diseases that destroyed so many millions in previous generations (and still afflict large parts of the world). We have learned that science can destroy us, so it cannot be our god, but it can, and should, be a tool, to work for the betterment of the human condition. Thank God for unlocking the secrets of His creation, for our benefit.

“Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits - who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.” (Psalm 103:25)

Why Active Gratitude is Important

Thankfulness (including for “little things”) keeps alive the wonder of what we have. It fosters a spirit of generosity in our hearts (Psalm 37:26) and defuses negativity and pessimism. It helps immunise us against cynicism, me-too-ism and taking others for granted. It keeps our focus on the Giver and enhances trust. Thankfulness takes the attention off ourselves. It is an antidote to bitterness and resentfulness. Like the morning sun, it burns the frostiness off relationships and negative personal feelings. It reminds us that we are dependent on others, that we do not have the monopoly on wisdom and good ideas, that others can be part of the solution to the issues we face.

When we are grateful we value what we have. Someone who has struggled to quit smoking knows the importance of good health. A woman who has lived in a refuge values the privacy of a home of her own. Someone who has suffered from a serious illness knows to value each new sunrise, as a gift. Write a list of the things that you are grateful for; you will be surprised.

Open your eyes to a fresh awareness of the world around you. If you have received, let gratitude motivate you to reach out and help others. If you have been blessed, look for ways to be a blessing to others, to cheer the cheerless, feed the hungry, comfort the bereaved, welcome the stranger and the outcast and help lead others into a fuller appreciation of the meaning and practical application of the Christian life.

Gratitude teaches us that we are not to rely on ourselves (2 Corinthians 1:9). It makes us aware that, while conscious of our morality, we can trust in the life of Christ within us (2 Corinthians 6:9). We can only have an attitude of gratitude as we see the cost of all that we have, through the cross.

The Problem of Ingratitude

I believe that lack of gratitude, of thankfulness to God for who He is and all that he has done in our lives, demonstrates a number of problems: failure to appreciate the hand of God in our daily lives; smugness that what we achieve is due to our personal efforts (“I did it my way”); a sense that our theology is not related to everyday practicalities; or that the blessing of God is simply our “right” as Christians (“name it and claim it”). None of these lays the glory where it should be, at the throne of God. When we are ungrateful we give the impression that what we have is due to our effort, our worth, that we deserve what we enjoy. Lack of gratitude leads to worship of creation rather than the Creator, of things rather than God the Giver (“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Romans 1:21).

That is why I like the idea of saying grace before each meal. It is a reminder that all we have has ultimately come from God. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). We are puny in a vast universe? But God is good; He raises us from puniness to membership of His family.

It takes humility to be thankful, to enumerate the many ways we have been blessed, what we have received, what we did not deserve, what grace has brought to us. It takes time to read the Bible and pray. It takes effort to reach out to others.

I have often wondered why I was born in a nation with privilege and have had so many opportunities. Not because of my hard work, because I have known hard workers in poor countries. Not personal integrity, because people I know who suffer seem to be paragons of integrity. Not because I am deserve more than others. The richest, wisest, most noble, best educated and most accomplished people eventually die, sometimes in unexpected ways, so our focus must remain on the eternal.

This is paradoxical in many ways. But it is no less so than the notion that if we seek to save our own lives, to secure our self-interest, our reputation, our name, our goals, we will ultimately lose them, but if we lose everything to Christ we will ultimate gain (my paraphrase of Matthew 16:25).

Being Thankful as a Lifestyle Choice

Thankfulness can be a launching pad, to face life with a new perspective (Matthew 6:25-34). It can improve your relationships, with your family, the wider community and God. It can open doors, tear down barriers you may have built, remove the tarnish that neglect brings and remind you of things of simple value that you have neglected. Thankfulness stops us sinking into despair, which is its corollary.

Does being grateful, as a lifestyle choice, mean that we will never get sick, suffer loss, go hungry or lose our job? Not at all, otherwise we would go through the motions of praising and worshiping God superstitiously, or as a kind of insurance policy (cf Job 2:10; Matthew 5:45). But the sense of faithful dependence upon God who “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17) should motivate us to trust him in all circumstances and humbly see the good things we do enjoy as reminders that our lives are in his hands, come what may.

The Christian life is based on faith, so we can be thankful for God’s work in our lives, even when things don’t go our way. That takes everything to another dimension. We trust Him, and are grateful for His faithfulness, because He knows the future, sees over the horizon and cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We can turn all of our circumstances to His perfect will for our lives (Romans 8:28) with a sense of genuine gratitude that His love and purpose will ultimately win out.