

When I was growing up, our home church really emphasized fellowship. So people regularly had one another into their homes. We got to know each other well. I remember my Dad telling me about this one family that we had just had over. The dad in the family had shared with the adults about a practice he had adopted when people asked that common question, “How are you doing?” Instead of saying “fine” or “ok,” he would answer, “I’m very thankful.” Given the unusual response, people would often ask him why he was thankful, or what he was thankful for. He might share about some little blessing that he appreciated. Or he might share something bigger. He often used the opportunity to give thanks to the Lord for the way God had looked after their family.

I remember thinking when my Dad told me this. I wondered if I could do that. I was still a boy. When I met up with friends, we didn’t really ask how each other was doing. It was more like “Hey, let’s play football.” If I tried this in High School, I don’t know what would have happened. People might have thought it weird or made fun of it or me, or maybe beat me up. I wasn’t ready to risk daily mockery just for the opportunity to express thanks.

Yet that man’s practice has always stuck with me. He must have thought a lot about reasons to be thankful.

Would you say you are a thankful person? Would people say of you that an attitude of gratefulness flows out of you? If someone close to you was asked to summarize your general outlook on life, would thankfulness be one word they might use?

Is there any benefit to being thankful? J.P. Moreland, a Christian Philosopher from BIOLA University notes a commonsense yet exciting discovery made by researchers. Here’s the discovery – Cultivating an outlook of gratefulness through daily practice will produce a deeply ingrained habit of seeing the world half full instead of half empty.¹ He quotes some he says perhaps is the leading authority on the study of gratitude, UC Davis professor Robert Emmons, who has written two books of gratitude. Emmons, a deeply committed Christian, makes this rather stunning observation. “Gratitude has one of the strongest links to mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality trait – more so even than optimism, hope or compassion. Grateful people experience higher levels of positive emotions such as joy,

¹ Moreland, James Porter . Finding Quiet (p. 111). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

enthusiasm, love, happiness, and optimism. And gratitude as a discipline protects us from the destructive impulses of envy, resentment, greed and bitterness.”

Moreland then says “Gratitude both helps us and requires a willingness to set aside “the negativity bias”—the habit of seeing and feeling the world in a grumpy way—and replacing it with a positive outlook on life we gain with a positive worldview through which we see, feel, and think about the world.” According to Emmons, dozens of research studies have demonstrated that we can do something about our anxiety and happiness, and expressions of gratitude are at the core of what we can do in dependence on God’s Spirit. Here are some of the benefits of the regular practice of gratitude: • increased feelings of energy, alertness, enthusiasm, and vigor • success in achieving personal goals • better coping with stress • a sense of closure in traumatic memories • bolstered feelings of self-worth and self-confidence • solidified and secure social relationships • generosity and helpfulness towards others

That’s quite the list. We could almost conclude that we were designed to flourish best when we are grateful and thankful. Many of you already know that we didn’t need a new study to teach us this. The Bible emphasizes the importance and value of expressing gratitude to God. It is overflowing with encouragement and commands to be thankful and live with a grateful heart. It does not say “you must be thankful on the second weekend of October in Canada and then you’re good for the year.” The Bible overflows with encouragement to be thankful and live with a grateful heart.

And yet, we all face obstacles to living grateful lives. Maybe we have developed a tendency to be negative or to worry. Maybe we struggle to acknowledge our dependence on others. We may have internal conflicts that block our ability to see reasons for gratitude. We compare ourselves with others we perceive to be more fortunate. This can hinder our ability to be grateful. Or one might have taken on a victim mentality or had a long history of suffering. Or we may be going through something very tough right now. So it’s harder to find reason to be grateful. I certainly don’t want to minimize any of these realities.

Yet, with all of these obstacles, we still have a choice about what we will focus on. We still have opportunity to develop new habits. Most importantly, we still have the Lord who wants to change and reshape us into all He created us to be, if only we will cooperate with His Spirit.

So we’re going to look at one of the many passages in the Bible commanding thanksgiving. It will show us part of what a genuine Christian life looks like. It comes from the letter to the Colossians. The Apostle Paul writes to this

community of believers in the ancient city of Colossae. Part of his instruction concerns living the genuine Christian life. He mentions the need for thankfulness and it pops up again and again through his summary. So we could summarize his teaching like this: **The genuine Christian's life centers on Christ and overflows with thanks.** We will see 3 ways we can center our live on Christ that overflow with thanks. Then we will look at 3 practices we can do in reliance upon God that will deepen the thankfulness in our lives.

Colossians 3:1-17 (ESV)

3 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **2** Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. **3** For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. **4** When Christ who is your^[a] life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:^[b] sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. **6** On account of these the wrath of God is coming.^[c] **7** In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. **8** But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. **9** Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self^[d] with its practices **10** and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. **11** Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave,^[e] free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, **13** bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. **14** And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. **15** And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. **16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. **17** And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

What is gratitude or thankfulness? It is a heartfelt acknowledgment that you or I have received a gift. It includes a recognition of the value of the gift. It also recognizes that the source of the gift is outside of me. And then you or I express appreciation to the giver of the gift.

The letter to the Colossians has several references to thanksgiving. It starts in the third verse where Paul writes, "We always thank God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you." Then he talks about unceasing prayer for them including that they will "give thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." In

2:6-7 – Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus as the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. So by the time Paul reaches this part of the letter, he has mentioned the need for thanksgiving several times.

Then chapter 3 begins when he now addresses their need to live as Christians. In the first verse we find the reason why genuine Christians will have thankful outlooks. So Colossians 3:1 - “If you then have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.” Then verse 3 – For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. So what follows describes the outlook of someone who has been raised with Christ and has died to their old life. So in verses 15-17, Paul provides a kind of summary of living this genuine Christian life.

Here we find **How to live Christ-centered lives overflowing with Thanksgiving. Way 1 - Let the peace of Christ rule your relationships and be thankful.** Verse 15 – And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. So notice this verse is written to the church or community at Colossae. Paul commands them to let the peace of Christ’s peace rule in their hearts. He references that they were called to this peace in one body. But what does it mean for us to let Christ’s peace rule our hearts?

Well the word translated “rule” was associated with a referee or umpire or a judge who delivered rulings. You know how a hockey ref or a baseball umpire makes rulings to govern the game being played? Well here Christians are supposed to let the peace of Christ rule over their hearts in relationships. So this is not really talking about inner peace.

It’s talking more about letting Christ’s peace rule over our interactions with one another. The peace of Christ is supposed to be the deciding factor. Whatever disagreements or mutual suspicions occur between Christians, all parties must allow the fact of their unity in Christ to settle the issue their issues. So the peace of Christ should be given preference over competing concerns and interests.

Disagreements can be challenging. But as Christians, were supposed to be able to come together and work through our disagreements in a positive way because we mutually know Christ. Since Christ brought peace between us and God, He can certainly bring peace between us and another Christian. For this to happen, both parties must be reasonable and work together for a solution. But sadly, sometimes Christians are unreasonable and cheat their brothers and sisters in Christ or take advantage of them, or crush their brothers and sisters. Paul recognizes this reality elsewhere in his writings. He says “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” But sadly, many of us are drawn into

difficult situations with other Christians. When that happens, we must still be ready to let Christ's peace rule if the other person earnestly desires that. When we resolve our differences with Christ's peace ruling over us, we can live in that joy of resolution. That's what genuine Christians work towards.

But then Paul drops thanksgiving into this verse. "And be thankful." He doesn't say about what to be thankful about. But he has introduced the need for thankfulness earlier in this letter, especially to be thankful to God for their salvation. So maybe believers who are thankful to God for salvation will find it easier to extend grace and forgiveness especially on petty issues. The more we realize how much we have been forgiven, the more we cultivate gratitude for God's indescribable gift in our lives, the less likely we will harbour anger and bitterness towards. Such thankfulness can help in letting Christ's peace rule in a community of God's people. So let the peace of Christ rule your relationship and be thankful.

The second way is found in verse 16. **Way 2 - Let the Word of Christ dwell richly among you with thankfulness in your hearts.** The full verse states "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." The word of Christ probably refers to teaching about Christ as well as the words of Christ himself. So this is a command to let the word and truth about Christ almost permeate and saturate our lives. This happens when believers come together.

Paul shows how this could happen. First by teaching and admonishing one another. So here we see the body of Christ using the word of Christ to teach and admonish each other. One way we can learn the word of Christ is when we hear it from others. We may hear them talk about it, teach it or explain it. But we also dwell in Christ's Word when our friends or brothers and sisters in Christ actually use the word of Christ to correct us. No one likes to be corrected. But if it comes from love and with an earnest desire that we walk more closely with Christ, then it may be easier to take.

But Paul talks about another way we can let the word of Christ dwell richly among us. By singing Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs. We learn truths about God songs that are based upon Scripture or reflect the reality of the Christian life. Paul mentions 3 types of songs. The term Psalm meant to pluck a bowstring. So this might be why a lot of David's songs were called Psalms. He was a harp player and maybe sang some of the Psalms to tunes he knew. Some of those must have made their way into the early Christian worship.

The word hymns occurs only here and in Ephesians 5:19. It translates a variety of Hebrew words referring to religious songs of praise to God. Then the last term “songs” is a very general term. Paul adds spiritual to the title. It could refer to a spontaneous, musical praise of God prompted by the Spirit. So it may be that Psalms were based on the Scriptures, Hymns were about Christ and songs were more spontaneous compositions. So, there seems to have been quite a variety of songs in early Christian worship. In this environment of teaching, admonishing and singing, the community would dwell deeply in the Word of Christ.

Notice the end of verse 16. “With thanksgiving in your heart” All of this deep dwelling in the word of Christ is to be accompanied by thanksgiving. This thanksgiving seems to be directed towards the Word of Christ. If we know the word of Christ, we have a reason to be thankful. In his words are life, hope, direction and peace. John 1:4 says “In him (Jesus) was life and that life is the light of men.” So the more we know and dwell richly in Christ’s word, the more we can walk by the light Christ gives us.

The third way we can live genuine Christ centered lives overflowing with thanksgiving is found in verse 17. And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Way 3 - Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus while giving thanks to the Father through Jesus. This appeal covers every part of our lives; whatever we do in word or deed. Live in a way that honors the name of Jesus. We are called to live our whole lives in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. So we don’t just dwell in His word richly when we are in community but when we’re alone, at work, at school or at home. The whole life of the Christian stands under the name of Jesus. Everything we say and do needs to be governed by the consideration of what it means to live in the realm of the risen Christ.

But again, at the end of verse 17 we find thanksgiving. But notice the way Paul talks about our giving thanks. We are to give thanks through Christ to the Father. This is not saying we can only give thanks to the Father through Jesus. *“Jesus, will you pass onto the Father my thanksgiving?”* Instead, it seems to highlight the privilege we have of giving thanks to the Father because the way has been opened up by Jesus. Through what Christ has done, we can give thanks to the Father.

How, then, does one cultivate a grateful way of seeing life?

Practice giving thanks a few times a day until thanksgiving becomes second nature. Even if we don't feel grateful, we need to ask the Lord to help us see and grow in gratefulness. So we can begin with small and simple observations. Thank God that you're breathing in the morning; that you can get out of bed. You may thank God for that hot drink you have on a cold morning; 39 000 customers in Manitoba have had no power since Thursday night; in Portage La Prairie, there is no ability to 'flush toilets' because the sewer system is backed up. Maybe you're not thankful for your current school courses, but you are thankful for that friend who helps you or that lunch place you eat at. Or maybe you don't have a job or you're not happy in your job. But you do still have the Lord with you. He does not ever forget us or take His eyes off of us or stop caring for us. The more we discover reasons for thanksgiving especially in God, the more we will focus on what we do have instead of what we don't. That's an instant recipe for a better outlook on life.

Another Thanksgiving practice you might consider is **keeping a gratitude journal** on your phone or in a notebook. Each day, we could write down things we are grateful for that day. We remind ourselves of the gifts, grace, benefits and good things you do enjoy. We often use journaling to write down our daily pains, sorrows or fears. But a gratitude journal has a very different purpose – it cultivates the ability to notice the good things in one's day and not the bad ones.

One final suggestion is to **write gratitude letters**. Think of people who have made a difference in your life and for whom you are really grateful. Pick one and write a letter to that person maybe a page or two in length. You can list all the things you are grateful for about that person. Then you could visit them to read the letter or read it to them over the phone. Think about how encouraging that would be to the other person and how you might also gain in joy from spending that effort remembering reasons to be grateful.

These are just a few simple ways to intentionally make gratitude a more habitual practice in our lives. Now we have an opportunity to actually express our gratitude to the Lord as we come to his table. Here we remember all He has done. Here we remember the cross and the suffering He endured for us. But we also remember Him being raised to life and that He will one day return. Will you use this time to confess thanks in gratitude to God for all he has done and for who he is? Let's meet at His table now.