

Sharing God's Blessings:
Living in Gratitude
Philippians 4:4-8

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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Have you heard the old story about the young man who enthusiastically joined the monastery? Wanting the highest and the best, the young monk immediately took the vow of silence. The solemn vow meant the monk could only speak two words a year and those were reserved for his annual evaluation with the Abbott. The first year passed and the Abbot asked the monk how he was doing. Without hesitation the monk replied, "Food Bad." Another year passed and the Abbott again asked the monk how he was doing. The monk replied, "Bed hard." When asked for an evaluation the third year, the young monk said, "I quit." "Well", said the Abbott, "I'm not surprised. All you have done since you came here is complain, complain, complain."

I want to talk to you today about an attitude of gratitude. Cicero once said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues, it is the parent of all others." Yet in our self-seeking, materialistic, look-out-for-number-one kind of world, gratitude is seldom mentioned in studies of psychology and largely ignored in the disciplines of religion. How about it? Are you a grateful person?

GRATITUDE IS A WAY OF THINKING

It is a matter of the mind. Paul put it this way: *Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things* (Philippians 4:8).

Gratitude is a learned behavior. We are not born grateful. Sandy and I are babysitting our 22-month-old granddaughter this weekend. That is why I look so tired today. You ought to see Sandy! When you are two, it's all about you. 'Hold me, feed me, change me, rock me, walk me, and do it right now!' Children have their ways of keeping adults in line. Any alteration is a battle of the wills.

What is cute for a two-year-old is repulsive in a twenty year old and intolerable in a sixty-year-old. Paul said it well: *When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put childish ways behind me.* I constantly find adults who have missed that maturation process.

Today I ask you to think about what you are thinking about! What do you have on your mind right now? When is this going to be over? What am I going to do when I get home? Who are the people who hurt me? Life is hard.

Paul says we should think on these things: the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the pleasing, the commendable. This is not a list reserved for the saints. This is a pagan list of desirable virtues. He took it from the Roman world in which the Philippians lived. Even unbelievers aspire to the finer thoughts of life. Whatever is just, right and pleasing, set your mind of things like that.

Great British preacher, John Henry Jowett, said, “Gratitude is a vaccine, an antitoxin and an antiseptic. It is a vaccine to prevent the invasion of a disgruntled, discouraged spirit. It is an antitoxin to destroy the poisons of cynicism, and criticalness. It is an antiseptic to soothe and heal the most troubled spirit.” Fill your minds today with the best, not the worst, the beautiful, not the ugly, the things to praise, not the things to curse. Cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

GRATITUDE IS A WAY OF BEING

It is a matter of the heart. “When it comes to worry and anxiety, take it to the Lord in prayer and let the peace of God “guard your hearts.” Let the Lord set up a military patrol around your soul. If you lose your heart, you have lost your reason to live.

What is the peace of God that passes all understanding? I am not sure I understand all of that but I want to tell you, the times I have tasted it, the times I have known it down in my soul, I wouldn’t trade it for anything in all the world. A neighborhood library offered a community competition for the best painting symbolizing peace. The award-winning art work would be prominently displayed in the library. When all the entries were in, the judges narrowed the competition down to two.

One painting featured a majestic lake, so tranquil and still that the lush hills behind it were perfectly mirrored in its reflection. Above was a blue sky, around it were blooming wild flowers. Behind it were deer grazing in the meadows. It was a piece to behold. It was a picture of peace.

The other finalist portrayed a terrible storm, winds blowing, trees bending, and debris flying through the air. The sky was dark, the sight was stark, and there was not a person in sight. There was, however, a bird perched on a limb on one of those bended trees. Observers got the impression that the bird was singing.

To which painting would you award the prize of peace? The judges chose the bird. Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is consolation of the heart. Paul wrote this from a Roman prison where he was sentenced to die.

“Though billows roll, He keeps my soul.
My heavenly Father watches over me.”

Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving; let your requests be made known to God (Philippians 4:6).

A District Superintendent preached a 30-minute sermon in one of his inner city churches on the subject of gratitude. He concluded the sermon by saying, "And remember, however small the gift, always be grateful to the Lord." The offering followed the sermon, and when no one could find the offering plates, the District Superintendent offered his hat for the collection. The hat was passed, but when it came back to the good Reverend, he shook it carefully, tipped it cautiously and discovered it to be empty. The congregation braced themselves for the response. But the clergyman turned to the altar, raised his hands and holding the empty hat in the air, prayed, "I thank thee gracious God that in your good mercy I have today gotten my hat back. Amen"

In the stress and struggle of life, some of us have lost our hats, not to mention our self-esteem, our hope for tomorrow, our confidence for today. Can you rejoice in the Lord anyway? Is there a song in your heart that the world never gave? Is there a peace the world cannot take away? Gratefulness is more than a momentary emotion. It is a profoundly spiritual and powerfully healing state of being that abides through the tides of time. Do you have a grateful heart?

GRATITUDE IS A WAY OF LIVING

So Paul says, "Keep on doing the things you have learned and received." Gratitude is a way of life.

Jesus was our earthly model of gratitude. Like every good Jew, Jesus thanked God before and after each meal. He was raised to be thankful for the food he received. In Sabbath school he learned to pray the Psalms. "Bless the Lord, O my soul ...and forget not all God benefits." Such were the prayers that came from Jesus' lips. In his hymn of Jubilation Jesus said, *Thanks God, for hiding things from the clever and revealing them to children* (Luke 10:31). In the Upper Room, where death was imminent in the air, He took some bread and gave thanks. Jesus was grateful for the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the critters that roam the countryside and the creatures that swim in the sea. He lived a life of gratitude. Do you?

To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch heaven.

A Texas business man, who had enjoyed ten years of quality life after a heart transplant, reflected on the difference this new heart made in his life. "In addition to this being a miracle of medicine," said David Saucier, "for a new heart to become a part of the living me is a miracle of God. Many people ask me if the heart transplant changed my life. It has in the following ways: 1) I have a renewed sense of URGENCY. I know that if I want to stop and smell the roses, I had better to it now. 2). There is GRATITUDE. I do not understand this miracle. All I can do is accept it and feel grateful for each additional day. 3.) Finally, I walk a LITTLE CLOSER TO GOD. When someone goes with you through the

valleys of the shadows of death, you develop a special bond with them. My God and I went through this transplant together.”

Are you living a life of gratitude?

Give thanks with a grateful heart.
Give thanks to the Holy One.
Give thanks because he's given
Jesus Christ his Son.

And now let the weak say, “I am strong”.
Let the poor say, “I am rich.”
Because of what the Lord has done for us.
“Live a life of gratitude!”