
5 BIBLICAL REMINDERS FOR THANKSGIVING

THANKFULNESS IS TIED TO THE CHARACTER OF GOD

“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” Psalm 136:1

THE FIRST prayer that many children learn is said in rushed anticipation before a meal: “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for this food.” There’s actually quite a bit of sound theology packed into that couplet, and we can extrapolate from it beyond the dinner table as to why we should be grateful before God in all of life: because he is *good*. Psalm 136 agrees.¹ This means that a study on the theme of thankfulness must start by contemplating nothing less than God himself.

To know God is to know goodness, for goodness is the “very essence of God’s being.”² God is the All Good. He is filled and overflows with goodness, which means that “nothing can add to him, or make him better than he is; nothing can detract from him, to make him worse.”³ Famed preacher Charles Spurgeon connected God’s character with our response of thanksgiving, stating that God “is good beyond all others; indeed, he alone is good in the highest sense; he is the source of good, the good of all good, the sustainer of good, the perfecter of good, and the rewarder of good. For this he deserves the constant gratitude of his people.”⁴

From God’s good character flows good acts. According to the psalmist, we thank God not only for *who* he is, but also for *what* he has done. God’s goodness permeates his original work

of creation and the way he upholds that creation still today. But for the Christian, God’s goodness is not something we observe from the outside, but something we experience from the inside. We can declare wholeheartedly that “his steadfast love endures forever.” We thank God because He has entered into a relationship with us and lavished us with his love. In the New Testament, we come to fully understand that this love was a love to the death. We learn that God sent his Son to succumb to death for our sake, so that we would not be conquered by the grave. Of course this must elicit gratitude! “Thanks be to God, who give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).

It’s not uncommon to see posts on Instagram or calligraphied wall art in our friends’ homes that instructs us to “Be Grateful.” Okay—but how? If my spirit of thankfulness is based on my spouse, what do I do on day when they’re not all that good to me and I don’t sense their love? If it’s based on my social status, work performance, or reputation, what happens if I lose these things? But when I root my thankfulness in the soil of God’s good character and acts, I can indeed be grateful. Because I know that I am in his care, under his watch, and this good God loves to work all things for my good (Rom. 8:28)!

Do you see how knowing God has to be the starting place for showing gratitude?

1 As does Psalm 106:1, 107:1, 135:3; 2 Chron. 5:13; 7:3; Jer. 33:11; Nah. 1:7.

2 Wilhelmus á Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, I:122.

3 Stephen Charnock, quoted in Terry Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2019), 239.

4 Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, no date), 3:204.

2

THANKFULNESS IS THE FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING



“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Romans 12:1

WHY SHOULD we do good?

That question has puzzled philosophers for millennia, and even the least philosophical among us have wrestled with it. Truly, whether they realize it or not, the ethics of every individual is governed by their answer to this question. A few radicals would answer that there’s in fact no moral obligation to do good: life is a free-for-all, and if you choose to do good it’s because you’re personally fulfilled by doing so. Many believe you do good in order for good to happen to you—a karma-esque view of ethics. Closer to the mark are those who believe, though perhaps can’t explain, that there’s some higher, transcendent authority or imperative that compels us to do good to others.

The Christian faith provides a different answer: We do good because we’re *grateful*. One ancient church teaching tool answered the question, “Why then should we do good works?” like this: “Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, is also renewing us by his Spirit into his image, *so that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits.*”¹

Have you ever noticed that the consistent motivator the Bible gives for obeying God and loving neighbor is gratitude? It’s our thankfulness for the gospel—the fact that Christ took our sin and hell for us—that should inform all we do. Consider

what Paul writes in Romans 6:13–14, “Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” The Christian is one whose every thought, word, and deed is controlled by the knowledge that God has brought him or her “from death to life.” Similarly, as quoted above, it’s the manifold “mercies of God” that undergird Paul’s call to us that we offer our entire selves in a holy manner before God (12:1). Paul knows, from personal experience, that mercy is the best motivator. Thus, as a 19th-century Scottish theologian once wrote, “in the New Testament religion is grace, and ethics is gratitude.”²

Do you have a thankful disposition in your heart? The Christian calling is rendered an impossibility without it. “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” (Col 3:17). We might be able to have some semblance of moral uprightness if motivated by merit (the hope of earning something from God), but this can’t last. Even less stable is the motivation of fear. But the 12-century monk Bernard of Clairvaux taught us well that “the soul that loves God seeks no other reward than that God whom it loves.”³

Gratitude is not an optional virtue, but a vital one that sustains the others. Only a grateful response to God’s gospel mercy can make us “obedient from the heart” (Rom. 6:17).

¹ Heidelberg Catechism 86.

² Quoted in John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: 1994), 321.

³ Quoted in Dan Doriani, *The New Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 21.

3

THANKFULNESS IS GOD'S WILL FOR YOU



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

IF IT'S true, as we've seen, that thankfulness is the foundation for all Christian ethics, then the numerous Bible exhortations to be thankful at all times should come as no surprise to us. Beyond the above-quoted verse, Paul's desire is that we “[give] thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20). Thankful *always*? Thankful *for everything*? Giving thanks *in all circumstances*? Who is possibly cut out for this?

We all know someone who seems to have a cheery disposition no matter what, someone on whom the sun always seems to be shining. At some point or another the persistent pleasantness may start to annoy us, because it just doesn't seem natural! At a low moment, you might permit yourself to think, *Why can't they be as a grumpy as me?* But, in reality, we should admire this attitude. What might we do to better cultivate it ourselves? How can we live in faithful submission to the command of always and only thankfulness—especially in light of the troubles and sorrows of life that will inevitably come?

One of the most powerful correctives is to take to heart Paul's teaching here: Gratitude is “the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Thankfulness, contentment, and happiness is something that God actually *wants* for you! What a God we serve! It brings him a smile to make me and you smile. So many people are desperate to know God's will in their lives, seeking answers and direction. Well, here we have it: one of the few places in the Bible where God's will is explicitly spelled out for us. The direction he would have us walk is the way of joy, ceaseless communion with him, and constant thankfulness.

Simply knowing that the God of the universe has an invested desire that I be grateful changes my perspective. How about yours? He has charted this course for us through the gift of the gospel, having “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (Eph. 1:3). When we survey our circumstances and we sense lack or disappointment, we must preach to ourselves the truth that God has given us everything in Jesus, so that we would be contentedly grateful (Rom. 8:32).

Reformer John Calvin wrote,

God has such a disposition towards us in Christ, that even in our afflictions we have large occasion of thanksgiving. For what is fitter or more suitable for pacifying us, than when we learn that God embraces us in Christ so tenderly, that he turns to our advantage and welfare everything that befalls us? Let us, therefore, bear in mind, that this is a special remedy for correcting our impatience—to turn away our eyes from beholding present evils that torment us, and to direct our views to a consideration of a different nature—how God stands affected towards us in Christ.¹

God's plan for you isn't to be disgruntled or disappointed. Grumpiness doesn't make it into glory. God's will—both his *desire* and his *plan*—is that we'll be joyful for eternity. God wants you to be grateful, and what God wants he gets. For the here and now he has given us new hearts that are supernaturally equipped with a capacity for gratitude. And for the hereafter, we'll be so consumed with thankful praise that the thought of being anything less will be an absurdity. Instead, we will sing: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 7:2).

1 Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, reprinted 1981), XXI:297.

4

THANKFULNESS IS AN ANTIDOTE FOR ANXIETY



“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Philippians 4:6

HAVE YOU ever dealt with anxiety? Yeah, me too. For some, anxiety is a surprise guest that arrives in anticipation of big events or problems: marriages, moves, or money issues, for example. For others, it’s a life-long companion. Counseling, medication, and a whole host of other remedies are employed to keep anxiety at bay. To that list, let’s not forget a simple antidote that the Bible commends: thankfulness.

Paul tells us to combat our anxieties with prayers that are tuned with gratitude to God. To him, this is an exercise in totality: don’t be anxious about anything; instead be thankful in everything. This is easier said than done, of course, but it should help in our pursuit of a thankful heart to understand why gratitude is such a powerful corrective to anxiety. I can think of at least three reasons.

First, *thankfulness gets me outside of myself*. Anxiety is an obsessive concern for me, myself, and I. It means the loudest voice in our heads is our own, and God’s is often drowned out. Conversely, thankfulness is an active recognition of the wonderful things of life that come from outside of us, specifically from God himself. And for those who struggle with anxiety, this doesn’t come naturally. It’s a mission we must intentionally undertake: searching the world for truth, goodness, and beauty, and poised and ready to offer praise to God for granting it (see James 1:17).

Second, *thankfulness takes my mind off of what I don’t have and causes my thoughts to dwell on what I do have*. It’s the simple exercise of counting our blessings. Anxiety lives in the land of lack: I don’t have a good job, I don’t have a spouse, I don’t have many friends, I don’t have good looks, I need more money, I need better health. Thankfulness extinguishes that destructive way of thinking because it rejoices in the reality

of God-given excess. Isn’t that what Jesus taught when he spoke on anxious fears? “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious” (Matt. 6:30–31).

Third, *thankfulness gets me talking to God, who alone can still the anxious heart*. This is what Paul is after, isn’t it? “With thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Talk to God when you’re fearful or worried, Paul says. Why? Because he’s the one who can help. As the psalmist reminds us: “Only God gives inward peace, and I depend on him. God alone is the mighty rock that keeps me safe, and he is the fortress where I feel secure” (Ps. 62:5–6, CEV). So there is an important correlation here: the more thankful we are, the greater peace we’ll experience and feel. Thankfulness is what “leads me to the Rock that is higher than I” (Ps. 61:2).

5

THANKFULNESS SHOULD INFORM OUR PRAYERS



“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” Colossians 4:2

PAUL CONNECTS prayer and thanksgiving numerous places in his writings. For example, we considered his instruction in Philippians 4:6 (“In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”), and we shouldn’t overlook the proximity between the commands to pray and to be thankful in 1 Thessalonians 5: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (vv. 16–18). This makes good sense, because in essence thanksgiving is prayer. If prayer is our address to God, then any time we give him thanks we’re praying. Thanksgiving and prayer are one and the same.

At least, they ought to be.

If we’re honest, there are many times we speak to God and neglect to mention a single thing we’re grateful for. We usually “run out of time” to do so after listing all the things we want from him. But real prayer—prayer that lasts, prayer that builds our personal relationship with God—will be shot through with thanksgiving. When over a hundred British theologians gathered in the 17th century to create a doctrinal statement for the church, they defined prayer like this: “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.”¹ In other words, they felt prayer couldn’t be defined apart from “thankful acknowledgment.”

This is something we must be intentional about, and so Paul gives a warning in Colossians. He knows we can be so slothful and lazy in our prayers, so he tells us to persevere in them by being “watchful”—on the lookout that we don’t neglect this

important privilege and duty. And one of the primary ways we ensure our watchfulness is by being thankful. If we’re intentional, or watchful, about being thankful, prayer will naturally follow. As one theologian explains it, “Here is the best and necessary companion of the prayer that perseveres. Prayer can no more exist without praise than true praise without prayer: the one fuels the other.”²

If we’re not diligent to offer up thanksgiving to God, our prayer life will soon die out. What could you be thanking God for today? Your home? The health of a loved one? The companionship of a friend? How about the cross of his Son, the comfort of his Spirit, and the clarity of his Word? When you consider the nature of God and the glories of the gospel, the list is endless.

Interestingly, Paul tells us that even in our requests we should be thankful: “By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” How can we be grateful when asking for something we don’t have? Because we’re asking the one who works all things for our good (Rom. 8:28). In that light, even our yet unanswered petitions are made with a grateful heart because we know however God answers them will be for our safety and security. When we really understand who God is and how he works, all of our petitions will be presented in praise.



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¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism 98.

² R. C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians & Philemon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 172.

