

Gratitude as a Foundational Spiritual Discipline

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Psalm 100; Philippians 4:4-9
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'Sent From the Heart of God' is our theme for the year here at Lewinsville. This theme comes from the understanding that the church exists to be *sent on a mission into the world*. The church does not exist for its own sake, we do not exist for the sake of mere institutional survival, we exist to be sent on a mission into God's mission field, which is our neighborhood, our community, and the world, which God so loves. Our mission is to love the world as Jesus does, to take the love and the grace of God to people and places where that love is not being experienced, and to share God's heart with our neighbors, our enemies, and the whole world.

What I want to suggest this morning is that *gratitude* is a foundational spiritual discipline for going on this particular mission. If we want to be shaped as agents for this particular mission, we need to practice gratitude in an ongoing way. It may very well be the case that, as the CDC reported recently, practicing gratitude can improve your physical and emotional well-being.¹ It may also be the case that, as research from Northeastern University suggests, practicing gratitude can make people less anxious and greedy, less likely to *overdraw* from a pool of resources that is shrinking.² That could mean that the ongoing practice of gratitude could help us to reduce our consumption of goods and the corresponding negative impacts on the environment, so that gratitude can support and nourish our necessary earth care work. Gratitude may even be a sort of 'secret sauce' to finding happiness, as a University of California-Riverside study indicated that high school students who spent 10 minutes a week writing thank you notes felt more satisfied with their lives and more connected to others around them.³ All of those are very compelling reasons for us to get after the practice of gratefulness.

What I want to suggest you this morning is that gratitude is a foundational spiritual practice for those who want to follow Jesus. Gratitude shapes us to be sent into the mission field by Jesus.

I want to mention three particular character traits that gratitude cultivates in us, that form us so that we can embody God's heart: gratitude is an antidote to feeling entitled; gratitude softens our hearts into vulnerability; and gratitude draws us out of isolation.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/howrightnow/gratitude/index.html>

² https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/can_gratitude_help_you_live_more_sustainably

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Andrew Serazin and Robert Emmons have written in Time magazine that "Gratitude is a way of being that is grounded in the invitation to see life as a gift."⁴ Friends, everything that you have is a gift from God. Our daily lives are saturated with the gifts and contributions of others, from the engineers who designed the series of stoplights that got you safely to church this morning, to the grocery store manager who coordinated work schedules and product orders to get your morning cereal to the shelf. It is *so easy* for us to take the giftedness of our lives for granted. And once we take the giftedness of our lives for granted, it is a very small step to believing that we are entitled to all of these things. And this sort of entitlement thinking - which becomes particularly tempting when we are busy - leaves us woefully unprepared should those things get cut off for some reason. It also makes it more likely that we will refuse to share what we have with others.

Practicing gratitude, however, is an antidote to the traps of entitlement thinking. Gratefulness requires that you slow down, enough to notice the gifts that you have been given. Gratitude is the awareness that we did not make ourselves; there is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. Even when we have worked very hard to get where we are, especially when we have worked very hard, that ability to work is itself a great gift that God has given us, and for which we must not become exceedingly proud. Learning to see your life as a gift is one of the greatest spiritual tasks that will see you through.

Entitlement thinking leads directly to being hard-hearted, the opposite of being soft- and gentle-hearted. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is the paradigmatic example of hard-heartedness in the Bible. Pharaoh surely believed that he was entitled to his great monopoly of resources, because Pharaoh did not want to recognize his utter dependence on others. We, too, like to think of ourselves as independent. "I don't need anybody, I can do it myself," we like to say. Gratitude cuts against this, for gratitude leads us to recognize and notice all the ways that we are dependent on others.

When you become aware of how dependent you are on others, it is humbling, and our society does not much like to encourage humility. But humility is another 'secret sauce' to being happy. Our inter-dependence, our need for each other, turns out not to be a weakness – as the macho strain in American culture would have us believe – but a strength. As individuals, we are very vulnerable. That vulnerability, it turns out, it not a bug in the software. It is a feature. God created us for each other, and gratitude helps us to remember that.

Gratitude helps us to remember our inter-dependence, our connectivity to others, because you don't say "thank you" to yourself. We say "thank you" to someone else. Gratitude connects us to others, and it connects us to God. Gratitude draws us out of our isolation. So the next time that you are feeling lonely, write someone a thank you note. The next time you are feeling disconnected from your family or your friends, you

⁴ <https://time.com/6116973/gratitude-combat-climate-change/>

do not have to wait around for someone else to reach out to you. You can write someone a thank you note, and see what happens inside of you.

This is why the Bible is soaking with thanksgiving and gratitude and praise. Gratitude is not everything in the Bible, because the spiritual life is not a one-trick pony. You need to have multiple practices in your spiritual practices repertoire. But gratitude is one of the essential ones. You might even call it a "foundational" discipline. Psalm 100 invites us to enter God's gates with thanksgiving and God's courts with praise. As we grow in our awareness of the ways that God sustains our lives, the ways that God provides for us, the ways that God guides us on a moment-by-moment basis, our hearts soften into gratefulness. So I imagine that, after a lifetime of growing in this awareness, as we reach the time of our deaths and enter into the fullness of God's presence, we will do so – we will enter God's eternal courts - with songs of thanksgiving on our lips. We can begin practicing that today.

Philippians 4's instruction to 'rejoice in the Lord always' can sound to some like a recipe for denial. "How can I rejoice, given all of the pain in my life and in the world?" We can forget that the apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians from a Roman prison, where he was incarcerated. Paul knew the realities of suffering, as he wrote these words. That's why Paul insists that we need to make our requests known to God. But we make our requests known to God *with thanksgiving*. Grief and anguish are real. But they are not the entire story for any of us. Remember, the Christian spiritual life is not a one-trick pony. Gratitude and grief need each other. If we only practice gratitude, then we can end up in denial about the pain of our world. But if we only focus on our grief and our anguish, we can end up stuck in bitterness and despair. So Paul writes, "By prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God."

Gratitude is a foundational spiritual discipline for those of us who want to follow Jesus, and whom Jesus is sending into the world from the heart of God. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.