

Gratitude Is a Choice

Nancy Leigh DeMoss

Matthew Henry, the eighteenth-century Puritan preacher whose Bible commentary remains among the most popular of all time, was once accosted by robbers while living in London.

Perhaps you've experienced this yourself—whether by having your car broken into or coming home to discover that your house had been burglarized. It's among the most unsettling things that can happen to a person. I'm sure it was, as well, for a quiet, thoughtful man of letters like Matthew Henry.

Let me be thankful, first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.

What a perspective! As someone has said, "If you can't be thankful for what you receive, be thankful for what you escape."

Gratitude is the pure, appropriate response to the saving and keeping grace of God. Its opposite is ingratitude, and it can be deceptively dangerous in our lives and relationships. In the ongoing struggle of daily life—out there where feelings of disappointment and entitlement can easily talk louder than our best intentions—why choose gratitude over ingratitude?

For starters, here are three good reasons. Personalizing and internalizing these alone should be sufficient to continually outweigh whatever tempts us to whine when we should be worshipping.

1. Gratitude is a matter of obedience. Oh, how I wish it was enough for you and for me to do something just because God has told us to—not because it would give us whiter teeth and fresher breath, or improve our debt-to-income ratio, or improve our dysfunctional relationships. No. Just because He says so.

Like being grateful, for instance.

"Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving," the psalmist wrote, "and perform your vows to the Most High" (Psalm 50:14). "Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples" (105:1). The Psalms are filled with exhortations to "thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man" (107:8). The "attitude of gratitude" is a clear command and expectation of God.

This theme runs through the entire book of Colossians. In the course of just a few pages, the apostle exhorts believers about being "always" thankful (1:3), "abounding in thanksgiving" (2:7), devoting themselves to prayer, "being watchful in it with thanksgiving" (4:2). Then, as if summing up this whole idea, Paul seals it with one comprehensive, all-inclusive exclamation point: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17).

If you're sitting down to dinner, be thankful.

If you're getting up to go to bed, be thankful.

If you're coming out from under a two-week cold and cough, if you're paying bills, if you're cleaning up after overnight company, if you're driving to work, if you're changing a lightbulb, if you're worshiping in a church service, if you're visiting a friend in the hospital, if you're picking up kids from school or practice ...

Be thankful. God has commanded it—for our good and for His glory.

2. Gratitude draws us close. God's command to be thankful is not the threatening demand of a tyrant. Rather, it is the invitation of a lifetime—the opportunity to draw near to Him at any moment of the day.

Do you sometimes long for a greater sense of God's nearness? When pressures intensify, when nighttime worries magnify in strength, when the days are simply piling up one after another, or when life simply feels dull and routine, do you crave the assurance of His presence?

The Scripture says that God inhabits the praises of His people (see Psalm 22:3 KJV). God lives in the place of praise. If we want to be where He is, we need to go to His address.

This is a recurring theme in the psalms: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!" (Psalm 100:4). "Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving" (95:2). Thanks-giving ushers us into the very presence of God!

The tabernacle in the Old Testament was the place God set apart to meet with His people. In front of the entrance to the Holy of Holies—the sacred seat of God's manifest presence—stood the altar of incense, where every morning and every evening the priest would offer up the sweet scents, representing the prayers and thanksgiving of God's people who sought to draw near to Him.

Those ancient rituals were types and symbols of a relationship that we as New Testament believers can enjoy with God anytime, anyplace. Through His sacrifice on the cross, Christ has granted us access to the Father who dwells in us by His Spirit.

See what happens when you open your heart afresh to the Lord, moving beyond the normal, the canned, the almost obligatory phrases of praise and worship, where you truly begin to "magnify him with thanksgiving" (Psalm 69:30).

Yes, see if expressing gratitude to the Lord doesn't "magnify" Him in your eyes, increasing your depth perception of this One who knows your name, counts the hairs on your head, and manifests His love for you with one blessing after another. See if the practice of intentional gratitude doesn't transport you even nearer to Him—not just where your faith can believe it but where your heart can sense

it. Thanksgiving puts us in God's living room. It paves the way to His presence.

3. Gratitude is a sure path to peace.

I know a lot of women who suffer from a noticeable deficiency of peace. I'm one of them sometimes. I'm not talking about a peace that equates to having a day with nothing on the calendar, plopping down on the sofa with a cup of hot tea and a good book. Not that this doesn't sound inviting, but let's be honest—that's a rare occasion for most of us. The peace I'm talking about doesn't require a mountain cabin or a getaway weekend. It can happen anywhere, even in the most hectic moments and places of your life.

But only because gratitude knows where to look for it.

If we were sitting across the table from each other, you could tell me what's stealing your peace right now without having to think hard. You may be grieving a loss that never settles far from your conscious thoughts. You may be crying yourself to sleep at night over a situation with a son or daughter that is beyond your ability to control—a failing marriage, a little one undergoing diagnostic medical tests, perhaps open rebellion against God and against your parenting decisions. Maybe you're facing some health issues of your own, or your income just isn't meeting your monthly expenses, or your church is in turmoil over some hot-button issue.

We know that we can and should pray about these matters. But praying is not *all* that we can and should do. "Do not be anxious about anything," the apostle Paul wrote, "but in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God. And the *peace* of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

To put it even more simply: In *every* situation ... *prayer plus thanksgiving equals peace*.

When prayer teams up with gratitude, when we open our eyes wide enough to see God's mercies even in the midst of our pain, and when we exercise faith and give Him thanks even when we *can't* see those mercies, He meets us with His indescribable peace. It's a promise.

Oh, we can try it the other way. *Without* thanksgiving. In her book *Breaking Free*, author and Bible teacher Beth Moore describes the way most people live, by substituting the familiar phrases from Philippians 4:6-7 with their polar opposites:

Do not be calm about anything, but in everything, by dwelling on it constantly and feeling picked on by God, with thoughts like, "And this is the thanks I get," present your aggravations to everyone you know but Him. And the acid in your stomach, which transcends all milk products, will cause you an ulcer, and the doctor bills will cause you a heart attack, and you will lose your mind.

Prayer is vital—but to really experience His peace, we must come to Him with gratitude. Hard gratitude. Costly gratitude. The kind that trusts that He is working for our good even in unpleasant circumstances ... the kind that garrisons our troubled hearts and minds with His unexplainable peace.

Are you facing one or more chaotic, unsettled situations? Is your soul weary from striving, stress, and strain? There is peace, my friend—God's peace—waiting for you just beyond the doors of deliberate gratitude. But the only way to find it is to go there and see for yourself. God's peace is one of the many blessings that live on the other side of gratitude.

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