

“Grateful: Emotion v. Ethic”
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

One of the challenges we face when we think of gratitude is that we often limit it to being a feeling. We know from personal experience how feelings come and go and are often impacted by so many factors including our sleep and food intake. When life disappoints us, it is hard to recover that feeling of gratitude we had in childhood. One of my favorite examples comes from the movie “Up.” It is about the grief of a man who lost his life’s companion Ellie. From the day they met, they talked about going on a grand adventure to Paradise Falls, but life got in the way. When they finally could afford getting there, Ellie was too sick to make the trek. Here is a video clip of their hopes and disappointments <https://youtu.be/VR8hivLghrs>. After that Carl lived in deep despair because he felt like he failed his wife in fulfilling her dreams. He could not see anything but what he was missing. A sense of scarcity dominated the scene for him. The world around us is steeped in a narrative of scarcity. We are always taught to look for the next big, good, or fun thing. Even most of our world economy is built on a sense of scarcity and thus a desire to hoard. When we practice gratitude, we are working against our cultural grain of scarcity.

In her book, *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass, asks this: "How do you experience gratitude when feelings are elusive?" She then asserts that "Gratitude is both a feeling and a choice. The first often arises unannounced and the second takes a lifetime of practice." Even though we may know that gratitude is about the grace of God and that every day is a gift, it takes years of intentional practice to become oriented towards gratitude.

This was exactly what the Apostle Paul was recommending to the church in Thessalonica. Their expectations about the second coming of Christ got in the way of their ability to appreciate and enjoy what was right in front of them. Paul had a good relationship with that church. There were some issues, but overall, he thought they were on the right track. This was the capital city in Macedonia, a bustling seaport, with a new church largely gentile in membership.

Paul wrote to give the new converts both instruction and encouragement in their trials. There was a lot of pressure in that city on the church to conform to the norms of their society. This was a city that had a very dominant Imperial Cult (screen) where the worship and adoration of the emperor was very important. The followers of Jesus in Thessalonica were trying to be faithful and one of the things that gave them great hope is the belief that the return of Jesus was imminent. They just needed to hold on a little longer and things as they knew them would end. The way they understood the teachings of Paul was that Jesus was coming back literally before any of them would die. But several of them had died and it seemed that the delay in the physical return of Jesus was making them fearful. What if they got it all wrong? What if this second coming was not going to happen in their lifetime? These must have been tough questions for Paul to answer because the expectations of the people were getting in the way of their ability to appreciate their lives and the presence of Christ in them in the present moment. Paul brilliantly responds in a very caring way.

Paul reminded them of the basics of following the way of Jesus and that doing those things is the only way to live with hope in times of uncertainty. One of the things he prescribes to them is to give thanks in all circumstances. Even though their expectations about the timeline of the return of Jesus were bringing them down, they needed to be reminded that the only proper response was to keep the faith, pray, fulfill their mission, and to give thanks. Gratitude was a faith practice the people of God knew from ancient times. Actively giving thanks was the only way to ground the people of God in the story of God of enough instead of the story of scarcity of the world around them. Paul had every reason to feel the scarcity and pain of the world as he faced many hardships and challenges in his ministry. Here is a list of some of his hardships he endured in the course of his mission for Christ according to 2 Corinthians 11:23b-28 “With far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. 24 Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. 28 And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.” In addition, he lost several ministry co-workers due to conflict. Yet, in all of it, he practiced gratitude each day by praising God. One of my favorite stories about Paul is the story of him and Silas singing in prison according to Acts 16: 25 “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”

One of the pieces that really spoke to me from Diana Butler Bass in her book *Grateful* is how practicing gratitude enhances our experiences of the past, present, and future. She talks about it this way: “Engaging the past more graciously, living more appreciatively now, and building thanks into the foundation of our future. Attending to our lives with hindsight, wide sight, and foresight moves gratefulness from emotion to ethic.” Sometimes our gratitude for the past might be blocked by negative or painful experiences. But “recalling the past through the eyes of thankfulness strengthened gratitude in the present.” This is not about nostalgia; it is about seeing God’s grace even in difficult times from our past. Wide Sight is about being intentional each day about being aware of the grace of God in the present moment, even when it is hard to see. Foresight is how gratitude can build up our resiliency to face the challenges that come our way and to be primed to see the grace of God in what comes to us.

Since this week, we are focusing on the importance of practice, Whitney is going to invite you to a simple practice of gratitude. When you walked in, you were given a little notebook which we are inviting you to use today and in the next four weeks to practice a gratitude Examen. On the first page, you may write the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” The invitation is to reach for this verse each morning and to read it out loud and take a few moments to set an intention of gratitude throughout the day.

Whenever you become aware of 18th minute of the hour, take a deep breath and notice something you are grateful for.

The second part of practice will come at the end of each day. Take a few moments before going to sleep to (screen): 1. Become aware of God's presence. 2. Review the day with gratitude. 3. Pay attention to your emotions without judgment. 4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it. 5. Look toward tomorrow. Write these steps in your notebook and follow them each day.

Our prayer is that these techniques will become practices and habits of gratitude for you. We will end with a beautiful scene from the movie "Up" when Carl finally realizes that even though he and his wife never got to go on their great adventure together, she was so grateful for all the beautiful moments of love and life they shared together. In fact, they became her adventure: https://youtu.be/A_iURv6S0MU. Amen.