

The Case For Giving Thanks: Three Essential Elements of Biblical Thankfulness | Colossians 3:15-17

Faith Evangelical Free Church

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15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. **And be thankful.**
16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. **17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

Colossians 3 (NIV)

“Be thankful.”

Two little words that are easy to read and easy to remember, yet also easy to gloss over or quickly forget as well. A command so simple that obedience to it is often assumed, and the force of it at times blunted by our tendency to regard “thankfulness” as a matter of manners, etiquette, or protocol.

As soon as we start mumbling out first words, parents and caretakers begin reminding us to say “thank you” for the kindness we receive and the good deeds done for our benefit. Here in the midwest “thank you” is right up there with “oh, I’m sorry!” on the list of polite things you say when interacting with anyone and everything -- family, friends, perfect strangers, and even occasionally the display shelf you bumped into while sliding past a fellow shopper at a store.

“Be thankful” -- it’s an attitude that is called for over and over again throughout Scripture. Last week Pastor Steve talked about why thankfulness -- even thankfulness in our tough times -- is something God expects of us, no matter our circumstances.

- If we have a right understanding of who we are: sinful, rebellious, fallen enemies of God...
- And we have a right understanding of who God is: Creator and Master of everything, who loves justice and mercy, who demands obedience yet is quick to grace and abounding in steadfast love...
- If we bring those two fundamental convictions together and realize that God is a merciful master who is willing to give each and every one of us compassion, forgiveness, and salvation that we don't deserve...

Through that perspective it becomes beautifully obvious why the Book of Psalms concludes with the song, “*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*” (Ps 150:6)

The amazing grace of our merciful God is why there is a steady rhythm of thankfulness detectable throughout all of Scripture, and it is why the Apostle Paul increases the beat every chance he gets in each of his letters

- “*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*” he says in 1 Thess 5:18
- “*Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything*” we are told in Ephesians in 5:19-20.

Thankfulness is a hallmark, bedrock, necessary character trait of the Christian life. Because that’s true, this morning I want to focus on an aspect of our discipleship that sometimes gets overlooked: we know why we’re supposed to be thankful (because God is awesome)...but what about how? How are we supposed to be thankful? How do we live a life that is full of thankfulness? How might we go about expressing our gratitude and our appreciation for our blessings to the right people and in the right ways?

Because make no mistake, biblical thankfulness is more than just a feeling, or a warm, fuzzy attitude about the nice things in your life. Pastor and author NT Wright once said that when the Apostle Paul spoke of the gratitude Christians ought to have in their hearts and on display, he meant for it to be something that showed up in the way they lived their lives:

“If Paul is telling them [the Colossians] about thanksgiving, he is also telling them about thanks-living—about how to live on the basis of being grateful people.”

NT Wright

And so this morning we’re going to consider what it means to be all about “thanks-living”. To let thankfulness be such an obvious and beautiful part of our lives that it overflows into everything we say and do, and into all of our relationships.

We’ll do this by looking at Colossians 3:15-17 (especially v17), where I think we can see Three Essential Elements of Biblical Thankfulness.

1. Start Right: Be thankful to God for who He is and what He accomplished for you in Christ.
2. Share Often: Express (both to God and others) what you are thankful for, and why.
3. Take Action: Make your thankfulness obvious by what you do and how you treat others.

Start Right: Be thankful to God for who He is and what He accomplished for you in Christ.

The instruction to “be thankful” in v15 is so brief and so seemingly random that it almost seems out of place in the larger context of Paul’s teaching in Chapter 3. Back in v12, Paul began describing what our lives as “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved” should look like: things like compassion, forgiveness, and love all get top billing for the virtues we need to pursue.

And then, to this list of ideal Christian characteristics, Paul drops in thankfulness. It has no qualifier, and really no direct reference. Paul assumes we all know who we’re supposed to be thankful to, and what we’re supposed to be thankful for. And while it may have been fair for him to assume that his original reader would be able to follow along, we need to take the time to make sure we get the source and recipient of our thankfulness right.

If we look at the text, it’s pretty obvious to who it is we should be thankful: *to God*. No real surprise there, right?

- V16 clearly says our singing and praises should be lifted up “to God with gratitude in [our] hearts”
- V17 tells us that everything we do should include an attitude of “giving thanks to God the Father”

So we always, in everything we say and do, strive to give thanks to God. But in this passage -- and in many other passages throughout his writings -- Paul DOES NOT support this command of thanksgiving with a list of *things* we should be thankful for. He doesn’t suggest you thank God for *only/mainly* your health, wealth, or happiness. He never, EVER, calls for our thankfulness to be wholly or solely based upon the material blessings of God.

We do thank God for those blessings, but we also need to go deeper. We’re looking for the essential, foundational, critical element of our thankfulness. It is imperative that we begin our practice of thankfulness not by being thankful for the secondary things and/or blessings of God, but by FIRST AND FOREMOST being thankful for the primary, life changing, eternity-securing, salvation-granting *GRACE of God*.

How do you practice biblical thankfulness? By having a real, vibrant, utterly dependent grasp of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No blessing, no wondrous gift, no sweet memory or meaningful relationship should ever be allowed to take the place of unending gratitude of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. You must, first and foremost, be thankful to God for who He is and what He accomplished for you in Christ.

Here is why starting right is so critical: if we fix our eyes on the things of God -- on His blessings, on what He can do and provide for us, on what we feel like we need to make this life better -- as good as those things are, and as good as it is to celebrate them...if they take a primary place in our hearts over and above God himself...then the reality is we slip into idolatry.

Please don't get me wrong: it is good to be thankful for what God provides for you. I want you to celebrate the job you have, the health you have, the family you have, the dog you have, your sweet memories, your stability, and on, and on, and on.

But these things cannot be placed on the pedestal of our worship. Our gratitude for our blessings must be secondary to our gratitude to God himself. Because these things will all, one day, fail. They will break. They cannot endure and are not eternal.

They cannot bear the weight of your hope or satisfy your deepest needs. Again: the many material, relational, and beautiful blessings of God cannot bear the full weight of your hope or satisfy your deepest needs. Only one glorious, wondrous truth can do that:

6 "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Romans 5 (NIV)

When we say things like "give thanks to God, no matter your circumstances", it is not because your circumstances don't matter to God. It is not because we think your hardships are not real or that they do not need to be grieved or lamented. As I stand here and preach this morning I know there are people listening who are sick with COVID-19. Whose quarantines have destroyed their chance of gathering with loved ones for thanksgiving. I know there are folks who have recently lost jobs, who are heartbroken from isolation, or are just overwhelmed by anything and everything going on these days. And there are of course dozens and dozens of things that have nothing to do with the pandemic that can get us down or make us feel overburdened.

What I don't want you to walk away with this morning is the thought that I am telling you to just cheer up, to be positive, or to fake it till you feel it. Faking your feelings is never something God expects of us, teaches, or encourages.

Instead, what I hope you can see is no matter what your circumstances are, even if they are terrible burdens...this Gospel and this God cannot fail you. Your eternal thankfulness is not based on how life is going. It's not a measure of your gratification. It is based on how thoroughly and completely your life has been saved, forever. Followers of Jesus are thankful because of the life, death, resurrection, and love of Jesus.

This week you will likely be encouraged to think about what you are thankful for, and no doubt that list will include some truly wonderful things: your family, your friends, your favorite foods, the accomplishments of this crazy year you are most proud of. And it is good to reflect on those things, and to be grateful for them.

But I urge you, please: if you have a clear understanding of why you are thankful for those things, but a muddy, distant, or disconnected sense of why you are thankful for a loving God who sacrificed everything in order to save you...then please, take some time and dwell on that truth. Because there is not a blessing greater than God's love for you. There is nothing more precious or more valuable.

If you can manage to start right and **be thankful to God for who He is and what He accomplished for you in Christ**, then from that foundation you can add your thankfulness for his many good gifts and blessings.

The right foundation of our thankfulness allows for the rest of our gratitude to be richer, fuller, and an overflow of that maximally gracious gift of the Gospel. And as we set off from our good foundation, we move into the other two elements of biblical thanksgiving: Sharing Often and Taking Action.

Share Often: Express (both to God and others) what you are thankful for, and why.

In Colossians 3:15-17, Paul directs us all to take part in one of the oldest, most treasured practices of the people of God: Share your gratitude! **Express (both to God and others) what you are thankful for, and why.** Again, listen to how prominently Paul places thankfulness in the expected habits of the Christian life:

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. **And be thankful.**
16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. **17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

Col 3 (NIV)

As followers of Jesus we should be people who are known for having thanksgiving and gratitude fill our hearts, our relationships, and our conversations! It should be a feature of our preaching and our teaching, it should be lifted up in our songs and praises, and it should fill the words we share with God and the words we share with others as well.

Thankfulness is an identity marker of being part of God's people. That doesn't mean we get it right all the time. We're still imperfect, and from time to time we will still slip into grumbling instead of gratitude, and selfishness instead of humility.

Even so, as Christians we need to be committed to intentionally cultivating thanksgiving in our lives and sharing it often, outloud, with others.

So yes, the time has come my friends, to ask you all the quintessential Thanksgiving Question.

HOWEVER...I'm not going to let you off by just creating a mental list of gratitude. We're going to challenge ourselves a bit more than that.

With this in mind, I ask you all:

- What are you thankful for? -- AND --
- Who do you need to tell? With whom do you need to share your thankfulness? Who needs to hear your appreciation, who needs to be built up by your love, whose heart might be softened by your kind words and thoughtful expression of admiration?

Here's a challenge I'd encourage you to take on between now and the end of Thanksgiving:

- Come up with three clear, concrete, specific-to-you reasons you are thankful to God.
 - Push yourself to go beyond something general like, "I am thankful for God because he loves me", and get deeply personal.
 - Spend time dwelling on and developing a deep thankfulness for how the love and grace of God has saved you, specifically, from your sin and the brokenness of this world.
 - Once you have a couple, or even just one, reason for your thankfulness...go to God in prayer and celebrate it with Him.

- Jesus has made it possible for you to approach the throne of God and pour out your thanksgiving with gladness in your heart (“give thanks to God the Father through Him”). The opportunity is there -- take the time to do so.
- Similarly, I want you to pick one or two or however many people you’d like and tell them why you are thankful.
 - You could share one of your reasons you are thankful to God.
 - You could share a reason you are thankful for them.
 - You could reflect on what you are thankful for from this past year.

And really think about that last one -- people all over the WORLD are finding it easy and habitual to grumble about 2020. And make no mistake, there is a legitimate reason to do so -- we’ve experienced hardship and loss and disappointment like never before. Everyone is very familiar with that. So...try something else. Be different. Be the person who in the midst of so much gloom and doom...can shine like a light in the darkness with a heart full of thankfulness, gratitude, and love. In other words,

14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life.

Philippians 2 (NIV)

Thankfulness can be part of how you share the goodness of God with others. Share it as often as you can; express to God and others what you are thankful for, and why.

And if you need a little inspiration, head over to Faith’s Facebook or Instagram. All week we posted some absolutely charming and delightful videos of kiddos from the church sharing what they are thankful for. Hearing their stories may warm your heart, bring you joy, and might even offer you a little guidance in how to practice thankfulness.

The final essential element of thankfulness I want to look at this morning is our need to take action; to make our thankfulness obvious by what we do and how we treat others.

Take Action: Make your thankfulness obvious by what you do and how you treat others.

In Colossians 3:17, Paul links the extent of our thankfulness and gratitude to all that we do “in word and deed”. Our honest and earnest verbal expressions of thankfulness matter, but so do our actions.

Last week Pastor Steve shared the story of Jesus healing the 10 individuals suffering from leprosy. When they realized their bodies had been cleansed from the awful and ostracizing disease, they all rejoiced...but only one returned to Jesus to express his gratitude. Only one took the initiative to be thankful. Jesus praised this man’s actions, because acting on our thankfulness is a beautiful thing to do.

In Luke 19, Jesus meets the tax collector Zaccheus and basically invites himself over to Zacchueus’ house, overwhelming the man with compassion, acceptance, and kindness. Zaccheus is so moved that in an astounding display of repentance and thankfulness he offers to give generously to the poor, repay all who he has cheated, and separate himself from his ill-gotten wealth. Gratitude changed Zaccheus’ life forever, and his actions reflected that transformation.

Thankfulness needs to be expressed in our words, but also needs to show up in works. Our gratitude for God’s saving grace changes us into people who are kind and compassionate, quick to give, quick to sacrifice, and always ready to lift someone up with our actions.

In my office there is a small stack of notes, cards, and scraps of paper. Each contains encouraging words from members of this church family that folks have taken the time to write down and deliver to me over the years.

Those small acts of kindness and gratitude people have put in my hand or sent to my mailbox or slipped under my door...it is hard for me to put into words what those mean to me.

I don't imagine any of the notes took much time to write, or much effort to drop off, but knowing that someone would take that time, and take the action required to encourage me...it makes me feel loved, affirmed, and valued.

Which is exactly what our thankfulness put into action is supposed to do: build up and spread love to the people God has placed in our lives, and with God himself, too.

So, my beloved church family: thank you. Know that I, and the rest of the pastor staff, thank God for you all in our prayers. Thank you for being flexible and patient throughout this strange and difficult year. Thank you for remembering the grace you have received in Christ and striving to share that grace with others. Thank you for being here -- no matter how you are "here", online or in person -- at Faith E Free.

Now, just as I have thanked you...go out this week and thank someone else on the basis of and motivated by your thankfulness to the Lord our God.