

Training Session 27 - Becoming: Thankful

Objective

To create training regimens for gratitude that yield habits of gratitude

Key Scriptures

Colossians 2:6-7; Colossians 4:2-4; Psalm 107:1; James 1:2-4

Introduction

Not surprisingly, it was 72 degrees and sunny on this particular day in San Diego; it was, however, 32 degrees and raining in my heart. Big, dark, storm clouds had rolled in a few hours earlier when we heard the doctor say, for the fourth time, “the baby in your womb has no heartbeat.” Back at home, my wife and I began walking hand-in-hand down the street in our neighborhood, feeling somewhat numb. She looked at me and said, “I think we should go in and visit Maria.”

Honestly, I had no interest in visiting Maria, an elderly woman whom I had never met. I was sad, and I preferred to sit with my sadness and coddle it with the one person on earth who understood: my wife. Bradford, however, had a sense that Maria, whom she had met once, had something we both needed, even if we really didn’t know quite what that was.

So we knocked. Her son, Joe, answered the door and welcomed us in. I saw Maria laying in the bed by the window in the family room. She hadn’t moved in years. Crippling Parkinsons, coupled with osteoporosis, left her unable to get out of bed. Her hands shook violently as she slowly moved them. Joe introduced us and I forced a smile with a perfunctory greeting, “It’s nice to meet you Maria. How are you?”

A smile crept in the corners of her mouth as she said triumphantly, “Much to be thankful for. Much to be thankful for!” Her words scratched like a needle across the record of my heart. Jolted, I began to sense some of what the Holy Spirit was up to in summoning us to sit at the feet (literally and figuratively) of Maria. Her greeting was a window into the soul of a 90 year old woman whose life was “overflowing with gratitude” (Colossians 2:7). To draw near to Maria was to insert your coffee mug underneath a Keurig filled with gratitude. Gratitude was coming as sure as the coffee when you press the blue blinking button. We needed her to pour gratitude into our lives that day. Even more so, we needed to become people like Maria who were overflowing with gratitude.

We began a friendship on that day with a woman who taught both of us how to live overflowing with gratitude. Over the years, we would hear stories of how Maria lost her husband to cancer as she gave birth to her second child and continued to grow in gratitude; how she raised her two boys (one with epilepsy and special needs) as a single mom and continued to grow in gratitude.

The results of Maria's training in gratitude to develop habits of the heart were astonishing. Every visit with Maria, and I mean every visit without question or equivocation, always began the same, "Maria, how are you doing?" A smile crawled to the corners of her mouth, sometimes barely moving her cheeks, followed by a sure and certain hallelujah chorus, "Much to be thankful for. Much to be thankful for!" Always twice, much like when Jesus says verily, verily. Or truly, truly. It's as if, like Jesus, Maria was saying, "Pay attention, this is important. I have firsthand knowledge of what I'm about to tell you. We have much to be thankful for. Much to be thankful for."

We're in a series focusing on the type of people we want to become, and today we're going to focus on become people whose lives "overflow with gratitude." Why? Three quick reasons to get us longing for a life filled with gratitude. First, for your physical health. Hans Selve, a renowned endocrinologist and pioneer researcher on the impact of stress in our lives, stated that "*gratitude is the healthiest of all human emotions*" and discovered that it is the one trait that is most nourishing to our health.¹ Listen to that. A world renowned endocrinologist and leading researcher says if you want to improve your health, stop complaining and learn to give thanks as a way of life.

Second, gratitude is a game-changing character trait. I remember a guy walking into my house when I was about 10 and meeting with my parents. He worked with a financial investment company called Ron Blue. He has now been doing financial planning for 35 years and been in the homes of thousands of families. He shared a profound insight recently in an article he wrote. Here is what he said, "*After working in the field of family wealth for more than 35 years now, I can strongly assert that gratitude is the most important character trait for families to encourage and convey to their children and grandchildren. It is the one trait that can change everything. When I do have the privilege of meeting grateful people, I find that they are always **thinking about what is right** in their lives and **not what might be wrong**. They don't complain about others, because they don't have an expectation of what others can give them. Consequently, they live much fuller lives.*" One thing changes everything: gratitude. Focusing on what is right and not what might be wrong.

Third, and related, a life that overflows with gratitude is the best thing you can do for your spiritual health. For the last three weeks as we've discussed joy and happiness, there has been one common denominator: giving thanks! Giving thanks was one of three essential ingredients that leads to joy and happiness. The great ancient thinker Cicero knew this and said, "*Gratitude is not only the greatest of human virtues, but the parent of all others.*"² In slightly different terms, the road to joy and happiness runs through gratitude.

Gratitude, however, isn't a destination that is easy to reach, nor is it a place many are able to reside in for any length of time. Remaining in gratitude requires training. As Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, noted in her book about gratitude, it takes practice. She describes spending countless hours interviewing people and coming to the unavoidable conclusion that: "Without exception, every person I interviewed who described living a joyful life or who described themselves as joyful, actively practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to their gratitude **practice**."³ Today is about learning to practice

gratitude as if we were a student going to school. We have all learned through a process of academic training. Following this metaphor, in this training session, we'll consider the practice and training required to progress through the school of gratitude discussed in the Bible that characterizes a life that "overflows with gratitude."⁴

Preschool: Thanks for The Good Things

Learning to say thanks for the good things that come your way is one of the very first virtues parents and teachers seek to instill in little ones. This is the beginning of our schooling, whether it takes place in a home or a preschool. "Thank you for my chicken nuggets. Thank you for my ice cream. Thank you for my legos and trucks and dolls." So basic, but so important. When someone gives you a gift, say thanks.

The same principles apply as we grow spiritually, but the key is beginning to connect the gifts and the Giver. James 1:17 states, "Every good and perfect gift comes down from heaven." All good gifts are from God. Not some, but all. So thank Him! C.S. Lewis describes what can happen in your heart when he writes, "Gratitude exclaims... 'How good of God to give me this.' Adoration says, 'What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!' One's mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun."⁵ Gratitude can become adoration if we learn to trace the sunbeam to the sun. Tracing the sunbeam has become a shorthand way for my wife and I to move from simple, child-like gratitude to worship in the warp and woof of life. Yet, don't miss this—it starts with a simple, child-like thank you.

"Give thanks to the Lord...for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Psalm 107:1). His lovingkindness is expressed in so many forms, and the proper response is thanks. Like toddlers in preschool, we must learn to thank Him for His gift of a sunrise, a spouse, a family, a friend, meaningful work, a house, breath in your lungs, kale, ribs, a Honda Accord, and on and on.

As we give thanks for the unlimited expressions of His lovingkindness, we slow down, at least long enough to temporarily reside in gratitude before we are off to the next thing. For one brief moment, we pause and say, "Thank God for this sweet tea. For Starbucks. For the health to take the stairs at work. For my good friend John's encouragement. For this hot shower. Thanks God. You're really good to me."

In a very real sense then, learning to say thanks is like learning the alphabet. It's the equivalent of the ABC's of life. There is never a point in life at which the alphabet is no longer important. In similar fashion, there is never a point in life in which you stop giving thanks to God for His good gifts. You learn it in preschool and you practice it for the rest of your life, especially when you don't feel like giving thanks.

I'm not sure toddlers ever really do feel like giving thanks, but I've learned over the years from my mentor Scotty Smith that, "gratitude is a discipline before it's a feeling." We will feel gratitude *eventually* because we have forced gratitude *initially* into our lives when we didn't feel it. That's the way it works. Maybe, like Ann Voskamp, you practice the discipline of writing

out a thousand of God's gifts in a journal. Maybe you create a gratitude challenge with a friend to say thanks to God and people for 10 things a day. Whatever the methodology, start practicing giving thanks, whether you feel like it or not. Training happens regardless of feelings. So get started!

Elementary School: Thanks for Open Doors to Serve

We all matriculate from preschool to elementary school. As we do, we take what we learned with us and layer on more training and schooling. The same applies for our training in the school of gratitude as we seek to develop lives that overflow with gratitude. We take the basic building block of gratitude (saying thanks for the good things) and we layer on learning to thank God for opening doors to serve people. Just as we never leave behind the fundamental tools of the alphabet that we began learning in preschool, we never leave behind the fundamental tools of gratitude for the good things God gives us. In fact, it should be just the opposite. Our proficiency in gratitude for God's good gifts should increase with increased usage over time.

But why is learning to thank God for open doors to serve people the next phase of gratitude training? Well, think about preschool. In preschool, we learn to say thanks for good gifts, which sounds something like this, "God, thank you for mommy and daddy and grandma and grandpa." Basic. Toddlers get this. Toddlers, however, don't typically take it to the next level and start looking for open doors to serve their Mom and Dad. Mine certainly haven't!

The natural progression from the preschool level of gratitude (thanks for Mommy) to the elementary school level of gratitude (thanks for open doors to serve Mom) requires training. It's both taught and caught and it doesn't come naturally. John Maxwell describes this growth process in leaders in an article entitled "Why Gratitude Makes You a Better Leader" where he states, "When we thank people, we're reminded of our dependence on them and inspired to serve their needs instead of insisting they meet ours."⁶ Noticing people and the things they do for us is a big deal. It's the growth curve that happens as toddlers move into elementary.

I saw this in my daughter recently. After finishing fifth grade, we went on a mission trip to Colombia and on the way back I asked her what her biggest takeaway was. She said, "Dad, I learned that life is not about me!" Yes, yes, and yes! This trip helped her learn to thank God for open doors to serve people because we aren't at the center of the universe. Jesus is. As we returned home, the way I am trying to help her grow (with me) in an others' focused life is by giving thanks for the open doors God provides to serve.

Gratitude, you see, fuels the fire of serving others. Paul knows this, so he commands the Colossians to "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" (Colossians 4:2). Devote yourself. This involves training. It involves a daily habit of the heart. Paul wants the Colossians (and us) to come to God daily in prayer and not just with any old prayer, but with hearts full of gratitude for other people. As we do, we will naturally look for ways to serve them, which is why Paul follows up with, "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message" (Colossians 4:3). There it is. Paul, a world class gratitude trainer, encourages his students of gratitude to develop an ongoing devotion to serving people, so much so that he encourages recruiting other people to pray for open doors to serve others. As students, our task

is to both recruit others to pray for open doors to serve others AND give thanks when God provides them!

High School: Thanks In Trials

The next level of training in the school of gratitude comes when we learn to give thanks in trials. Just as the difficulty level increases as we progress through school, so does our gratitude training as we progress through the school of gratitude. Learning to thank God for trials is far more difficult than learning to thank God for good gifts or good people to serve.

Yet, over and over again, God commands us to do so. James 1:2-4 is one place where God commands us to give thanks in trials. I mentioned my cousin Maury in a previous training session on joy because he taught me how to apply this verse. When my cousin Maury and his wife gave thanks at dinner the night they found out she had stage 4 cancer, it was obvious they weren't toddlers in the faith. They had put in the hard work of training in the school of gratitude and they were ready to apply the training they had put in place in years past. They stepped to the podium and gave a virtuoso performance on how to say thanks in all things, especially the hard ones (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

As a result of their training in the school of gratitude, no one needed to prompt them to give thanks during their trial with stage 4 cancer. The very first night they chose to go out for a nice dinner, they looked at one another and said, "We are going to 'Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds'" (James 1:2). How could they give thanks in this trial? How could they keep giving thanks when her condition worsened? How could Maury have his hands lifted high in thanksgiving and worship at his 32 year old wife's funeral?

The only way they were able to give thanks in the present trial was because they had learned to give thanks in past trials. They had done their training in the school of gratitude over the years. The word James uses that they quoted is ***consider***. Consider can also be translated *count it or reckon it*. In other words, *think, reckon, and count* trials like cancer differently than the world does: count trials as pure joy. Maury and Nikki needed a Biblical view of joy to count or consider cancer as pure joy.

In our previous training session, we defined joy as an ongoing choice to see, trust, and thank Jesus in all things, including cancer. Cancer became a critical choice point in their journey to count it as pure joy. Jesus was numbering their days, not cancer (Psalm 139:16). Jesus was authoring their story, not cancer (Hebrews 12:2). With each day, I watched them **trust** His authority when treatment plans went well and also when they didn't go so well. From phone calls, to texts, to prayer gatherings, I watched my cousin and "the great cloud of witnesses" surrounding him speak words of life and gratitude throughout (Hebrews 12:1). In the end came the hard and painful grace of trusting Christ's authority over Nikki's earthly death and new heavenly life. To count cancer as pure joy isn't to live in constant denial; it's to live in constant rebuttal of Satan's attempts to construct footholds of bitterness in our lives by seeing, trusting, and thanking Jesus. In doing so, even cancer can be considered pure joy. By persevering in gratitude, they were letting "perseverance finish its work so that you may be **mature** and complete, not lacking anything." Persevering in gratitude is indeed what matures you.

Maury and Nikki followed in the footsteps of a long line of saints who walked with gratitude through trials. For instance, Saint Therese of Lisieux showed the world how to do this when she considered tuberculosis pure joy as the disease was taking her life at the all too early age of 24. “If you should find me dead one morning,” said Saint Therese of Lisieux, whose short life was drawing to a close, “don’t worry. It’s just that the good Papa God will have simply come for me. Yes, it is a great grace to receive the Sacraments, but when God does not permit it, it is fine just the same. **All is grace.**”

All is grace. Really? Even the bad things, like tuberculosis and cancer. Are tuberculosis and cancer and other trials grace? The only way you can say all is grace is if you can see Jesus with you in it and trust Him to weave and work all things for your good and His glory, even if that means earthly death. Saint John of Avila faced a different set of trials in the 16th century. He found himself surrounded by clerical corruption, unprecedented consumerism, and spiritually bankrupt seminaries. He saw this trial as an opportunity to give thanks and to start new seminaries and fearlessly denounce the decadent leaders, which led to his interrogation in the Inquisition. Through it all, St. John of Avila said, “One act of thanksgiving, when things go wrong with us, is worth a thousand thanks when things are agreeable to our inclinations.”

Then there’s Daniel. When he learned that wicked men were trying to destroy him, “he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before” (Daniel 6:10). Daniel had a habit of gratitude and his gratitude included trials. St. Paul, as we have mentioned, taught a master class on gratitude through trials. His list of trials in 2 Corinthians 11 would make even the strongest of heart grow faint. The man received an unthinkable painful 39 lashes with a flesh-ripping whip five times. Five times! Not to mention beaten with rods, imprisoned, shipwrecked three times, and on and on. Yet, he found a way to consider these trials pure joy, so much so that he encouraged the Ephesians (from jail) to give “thanks **always** and **for everything** to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20).

Then there is Jesus. Jesus was and is and always will be the ultimate example of a life lived with gratitude. “For the joy set before him, he endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). We’re told that he gave thanks and broke the bread, saying essentially, “I’m thankful that I can be broken so that you won’t have to be broken. I’m thankful that my brokenness can make you whole.” Surely, when he commanded us to “do this in remembrance of me,” he meant more than simply taking the sacramental meal. Surely he also meant do this--learn to give thanks in trials because God is at work in you and others through them.

Thankfully, because Jesus persevered, we can say with the confidence of Jesus’ brother James, “the testing of your faith **develops** perseverance” (James 1:3). It will happen. Our role is to “let perseverance finish its work.” Let Him. Let Jesus, the persevering One finish His work on us and in us during trials. How? By considering or counting trials in a different way. The big trials (like cancer) and the ordinary trials of meeting your sales quotas and parenting and work that seems mundane. As we persevere in thanks, framing trials in the pure joy of Christ’s presence, the persevering One is maturing us. We are growing up in His school of gratitude. He is the unrivaled Head of School teaching us to say thanks in all things, for all is indeed grace.

College & Graduate School: Thanks Because of God's Purposes

The final level of training in the school of gratitude is the hardest. It's collegiate level and, in many cases, grad school level. It takes everything we just talked about in trials and adds the dimension of thanks for God's purposes being worked out in and through the trials you are facing, especially when you can't see what those purposes are.

Surely you have either said or had someone say, "Well, everything happens for a reason." Personally, I have never found that line very helpful, mainly because so often I have no idea what the reason is!

Once again, Paul shows us how to do this. The most successful church planter of all time finds himself in jail, again. Instead of lamenting the change in his career path, he rejoices because God's purposes are being worked out **because of** his trial. The first purpose he identifies is revealed because an otherwise unreachable people group known as the elite fighting force of the Praetorian guard were being reached for Christ. How? Because a Praetorian guard was handcuffed to him around the clock and he was relentlessly sharing the gospel with them. "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear through the *whole praetorian guard* and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (Philippians 1:13).

God revealed a second purpose He had through Paul's suffering. He couldn't preach anymore. What happens when Billy Graham (i.e. Paul) gets thrown in jail? Other people step up and try to be Billy Graham. And some did it just to make a buck, but Paul says, "But what does it matter? The important thing is...Christ is preached. And **because of this I rejoice**" (Philippians 1:18). Because of God's purposes going forth, Paul rejoices and gives thanks, even if it meant being sidelined in jail and other shysters preaching with twisted motives.

The challenge here, for mere mortals who are not named Paul, is that we so often struggle to identify the purpose of God in our trials. Even when we are able to identify what we think might be one of the reasons God is allowing us to go through the present trial we are facing, I can only imagine God smiling and saying, "If you only knew. If you only knew one tenth of all that I am doing by allowing you to go through this trial." One day, when we cross the Jordan, we will know in full what we now know in part. Until then, we train ourselves by developing habits of the heart whereby we're committed to giving thanks for God's purposes being worked out in our trials, *especially* when we can't discern what those purposes are.

Admittedly, you will feel like a confused sheep when you are going through your trial. Elizabeth Elliott put into words how I often feel when she described watching her friends, who were shepherds, treat their sheep for parasites. Her shepherd friends knew their sheep if left untreated, were vulnerable—unto death—to parasites. To prevent this, the shepherd took the sheep and submerged them, one by one, in a vat of insect-killing antiseptic. Elliot vividly describes the scene...

One by one John seized the animals. They would struggle to climb out the side and Mack the sheep dog would snarl and snap at their faces to force them back under. When they tried to climb up the ramp in a panicky way at the far end, John the farmer would catch them, spin them around, force them under again, holding their ears, eyes and nose submerged for a few seconds.

And as their lord and master was pushing their head under, drowning them at least as far as they could tell, their panicky little eyes would look up over the edge of the vat, and it was easy to see what they were thinking. What is god doing?”⁷

Surely you have felt this way. I certainly have. Elizabeth Elliot most certainly did when her first husband, Jim, was slaughtered on the beach as he and his missionary friends flew in to preach the gospel to the Auca Indians. She writes,

“I’ve had some experiences in my life which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor sheep. There are times I couldn’t figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from my great shepherd whom I trusted. And like these sheep, I didn’t have a hint of an explanation...There will be no intellectual satisfaction on this side of heaven to that age old question, “Why?” But although I have not found intellectual satisfaction, I have found peace. And the answer I say to you is not an explanation but a person; Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God....It’s He who was the Word before the foundation of the world, suffering as a lamb slain, and He has a lot up His sleeve that you and I haven’t the slightest idea about now. He’s told us enough so that we know that suffering is not for nothing.”⁸

In and through our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for His sheep, we give thanks, knowing that His purposes are being worked, *especially* when we feel like the confused, drowning sheep getting dunked by our Shepherd.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Colossians 2:6-7, James 1:17, and Psalm 107:1. Describe your current training to practice things you learned in the preschool of gratitude for the good things God provides. What are you currently doing to continue this critical training you receive early on to “overflow with gratitude?”
2. Read Colossians 4:2-4. Why do you think thanking God for opening doors to serve others is the next level of training (elementary school)? Describe how it impacts you.
3. Read James 1:2-4. How do you learn to give thanks in trials by considering them pure joy? What does the word consider mean and how do you consider trials in a way that leads you to give thanks in them?
4. Describe how much, if any, training you have done giving thanks IN trials? Give an example and how it impacted you.
5. Read Philippians 1:12-18. How does Paul give thanks for God’s purposes being worked out in trials?
6. Have you ever rejoiced for God’s purposes being worked out during trials?
7. How can you increase your training in this area moving forward?

Endnotes

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3724273/>
2. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/marcus_tullius_cicero_122152

3. <https://www.eomega.org/article/gratitude-is-the-key-to-a-joyful-life>
4. I am indebted to Pastor Steven Furtick for sparking my thinking about the progression of gratitude in our lives through a sermon he preached entitled "*Graduating in Gratitude.*"
<https://elevationchurch.org/sermons/graduating-in-gratitude/>
5. C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, 1992), 89.
6. <https://www.success.com/why-gratitude-makes-you-a-better-leader/>
7. <https://loveunimagined.wordpress.com/2016/10/22/suffering-is-never-for-nothing/>
8. <https://loveunimagined.wordpress.com/2016/10/22/suffering-is-never-for-nothing/>