

# THE GRATEFUL HEART

By

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One phrase in the Apostle Paul's writings forcefully describes our present culture, and provides a basic clue to the deterioration of morals and animosity toward Christians. The phrase is found in Romans 1:21 — **“Because that knowing God, they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks.”**

*Neither gave thanks!*

What a simple thing, to give thanks, and yet this is the watershed of the human race: on one side the self-sufficient ones whose end is death, and on the other, those who consciously depend upon the Father, give Him thanks in all things, and whose goal is eternal life in His image.

Despite all our knowledge and the abundant gifts lavished on us, generally speaking, we are an ungrateful people. Even the poor among us are rich compared to three-fourths of the people in the world, people who cannot even imagine the lifestyle that is normal for our nation. Instead of being noted for ardent gratitude to God, we are famous for complaining.

The progressive result of such ingratitude is described by Paul as those who professed themselves to be wise but became fools so that God gave them up to vile passions and all unrighteousness. This shameful degeneration describes our decadent society, as proclaimed from media headlines every day (Rom. 1:18-32). Men not only have failed to give thanks, but now our government seeks to ban such gratitude from public life under the false claim of separation of church and state.

As in other things in relation to God, our example in giving thanks is found in our Lord Jesus Christ. At the tomb of Lazarus, before he raised him from the dead, **Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you heard me. And I know that you always hear me, but because of the multitude that stands around I said it, that they may believe that you sent me”** (John. 11:41-42).

If Jesus recognized that it was a great privilege for God to listen to his prayer, how thankful we should be that He hears us. Jesus was God's only begotten son, a man whom God anointed with his holy spirit without limit, who never once disobeyed the least of the Father's commands. Still he humbly gave thanks that God heard his prayer. Compare that with those of us who have been disobedient, who have sinned repeatedly, and repeatedly found mercy and forgiveness. Don't we have far greater cause to thank Him for hearing us?

For Jesus to give thanks to God demonstrated his full dependence upon God. **“I can of my own self do nothing,** he said (John. 5:30; 5:19). As God's unique son and special agent, he could have felt that he had a right to God's special care, yet he never presumed on such a relationship. He repeatedly reminded the disciples that his teaching was not his

own, but the Father's who sent him (John 7:16, 8:28), and that it was the Father abiding in him that did His works (John 14: 10). Unlike Adam, who sought equality with God, Jesus "emptied himself of personal pride and lived as God's servant. **"He humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross"** (Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus had long since been anointed with power to raise the dead before he arrived at the tomb of Lazarus. Yet, in humility he gave thanks to God for hearing his prayer. Our culture champions the idea of self-sufficiency, and we like to think that all we are and all we have is the result of our own efforts, in the spirit of the song, "I did it my way." This leaves little room for us to be humbly grateful to God.

In his prayer Jesus said, **"And I know that you always hear me."** We can say the same thing, and this fact in itself is cause for great thanksgiving, to know that in every crisis and at all other times our Father not only knows our need, but also hears our prayers.

A chief hindrance to finding joy in thanksgiving is self-centeredness. As long as one is focused on having his own needs met and fulfilling his own desires, he will be unable to appreciate the magnitude of his blessings

It was because Jesus was totally empty of "self" that he looked to the Father in every situation, giving Him praise and thanks. He also instructed us to do the same, to deny self and make obedience to the Father our first priority. **"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness"** he said (Matt. 6:33). Paul expressed the idea when he said, **"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me"** (Gal. 2:20).

We give thanks to one who freely bestows a gift, a gift that is not earned and for which no payment is required. Some people have difficulty accepting such a gift, and instead of a simple "Thanks," may protest with remarks like, "You really shouldn't have," "This is too much," "I wish you hadn't..." This reluctance to be a humble recipient may be a sign of pride, or a fear of being obligated. To give thanks to God requires us to humbly lay aside our pride and acknowledge that we are ever in debt to him. It is only as we gladly accept this relationship that we can feel happy in giving Him thanks.

Another significant prayer of thanksgiving was during the Passover, the night before Christ's crucifixion. He knew that the time had come when he was to become the sacrifice of atonement on the Roman instrument of torture, the cross. At the age of 33 he was to be shamed, tortured and executed as a criminal in the cruelest manner. He would suffer this shameful torture and death, not because it was his will, but because it was the Father's will.

Completely aware of what the Father had in store for him, **"Jesus took bread, and blessed and broke it...and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body'"** (Matt. 26:26). In like manner He gave thanks for the cup. Which was symbolic of his blood about to be shed. Jesus gave thanks in the midst of the great crisis which engulfed him in the extreme horror of assuming man's sin and suffering its penalty of death.

The fact that Jesus gave thanks to God during the worst time that we can imagine is an example of what Paul meant when he wrote, **“give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”** (1 Thess. 5:18).

He does not say to give thanks *for* everything. There is a great amount of corruption and evil for which God is not responsible, and for which we are not to give thanks. There is a real danger that we grow bitter and cynical as we resist and oppose this evil. What Paul says is that in everything, even in the midst of this evil, we are to give thanks. In doing so we follow the example of God’s grateful son, who gave thanks even as he faced the worst that man could do to him, and submitted to the sacrifice as a lamb led to the slaughter. The grateful heart will not become hard and cynical, even in the times of trouble and suffering.

A while back a man in a state penitentiary wrote, saying, “This snake pit is an awful place. But every day I give thanks that I was sent here, because it was only after being imprisoned that I came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now I have fellowship with the Father and know a peace that I had never known before.” Even in times of hardship, trials, persecution, and sickness we still have fellowship with God and possess “all spiritual blessings in Christ.” These are great treasures, which cannot be taken away from us against our wills, and they give us cause for continuous thanksgiving.

Paul wrote, **“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called in peace; and be thankful”** (Col. 3:15). Like all of God’s commands, this command to be thankful is given for our benefit. Being thankful helps us guard against greed and make us content with such things as we have, so that we are at peace, even in a culture that glorifies avarice and idolizes the rich and famous. It frees us from self-pity and reduces the temptation to complain.

People such as those described by Paul, who “Neither gave thanks,” are often problem centered, focusing on their failures and the faults of others. Paul faced many problems, not only in his own life but also in the lives of those to whom he ministered. The Corinthian Christians had many moral and doctrinal problems in their congregation, and some questioned Paul’s apostleship. To them he wrote, **“I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus”** (I Cor. 1:4). Paul could face such serious challenges because he had a grateful heart.

“As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in your faith, even as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Col.2:6-7).

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