

A couple of weeks ago, I picked up a piece at the State Fair called, “7 Scientifically Proven Benefits of Gratitude.” The title made me curious – so what are the 7 scientifically proven benefits of gratitude? I bet you are curious too, so let me tell you.

1. Gratitude opens the door to more relationships – it helps you make friends.
2. Gratitude improves physical health. Studies show that grateful people experience fewer aches and pains, and report feeling healthier.
3. Gratitude improves psychological health. It reduces a number of “toxic” emotions such as resentment, envy, frustration, etc.
4. Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression.
5. Grateful people sleep better. If you have trouble sleeping you might want to take a few minutes before bed writing down the things you are grateful for. See if that helps. Apparently it helps most people.
6. Gratitude improves self-esteem. You feel better about life and often therefore about yourself.
7. Gratitude increases mental strength and resiliency. It helps people overcome trauma.

The little piece that I picked up concluded by saying that “developing an attitude of gratitude” is one of the simplest ways to improve your satisfaction with life.

Now if you came here to hear a self-help lecture, I could be done right now and I could sit down. But you didn’t come here to hear a self-help lecture. You came here to worship God and to hear a message about God at work in the world and in your life today. So what is the spiritual good news about gratitude for Christ followers today? Well, let’s start with the Bible.

There’s a theme that appears throughout the Bible – the theme is the need for us to be grateful – to practice gratitude – to practice gratitude as a spiritual practice - not just because it is polite or because it is good for us, but also for bigger, God honoring reasons. We will get to that in a moment. But first what the Bible says:

Ephesians 5:19-20: Make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.

Colossians 3:15-17: 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.

Psalms 136:26: Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his loving kindness endures forever.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Give thanks in all circumstances – wow! The bar is set high. Give thanks in ALL circumstances ... Why? Because this is the will of God. This isn't optional, my friends. This isn't just about some personal benefit that you reap by being grateful. This is about God, and your relationship with God.

So gratitude starts with God. Another way to say that is that real gratitude comes not from happy circumstances or the acquisition of more stuff. Real gratitude comes from a bigger awareness of God's presence and God's goodness. Psalm 103 says, "Praise the Lord, O my soul and forget not all God's benefits..." the root of benefits is *bene*, the old Latin word for *good*. And of course God is the benefactor – the giver of what is good.

I've often wondered about that story of the healing of the ten lepers, which was today's scripture lesson. The story opens with ten souls, walking a distance from the main road, which they had to do by law, because of their disease. Leprosy was a horrible disease. It tore through the body, causing infection, pain and mutilation. Leprosy was also highly feared. It was contagious, so if someone came down with leprosy, they were isolated from their family, their friends, and the whole rest of society so that no one else would get it. If someone came down with leprosy, any hope and dream of living a productive, purposeful life among family and friends, was over, simply because of the accident of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and contracting the disease. Well into the Middle Ages, people with leprosy had to wear special clothing, shake bells, and yell "Unclean, unclean," when they were any where near other people in order to warn the others to stay clear.

So here we are today with ten people.... ten people with leprosy ... ten people isolated from the families they knew and loved, ten people living with constant pain of their physical condition and of their isolation from the rest of the world. Hurting and friendless, they call out to Jesus.

Now it is interesting that nine people with leprosy are traveling with a Samaritan who has leprosy. The Jews did not consider Samaritans to be acceptable people. They were foreigners whose religion was slightly different. Nevertheless, on this day, the one Samaritan was with the other nine who presumably were Jews.

Jesus saw them, as they called out. He told them to go show themselves to the priest. In those days, the priest of the temple was the one to certify that you were healed and clean. Once the priest did so, you were allowed back into society. Ah, but that was a problem for the Samaritan. Priests preached against Samaritans. If the Samaritan went to the priest, he would not be welcomed. No priest would certify him. He was on his own, healed from leprosy, but not from the affects of prejudice.

The text tells us what happens next: "Then one of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back, praising God in a loud voice, prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan."

The Messiah, the Christ, was supposed to come to the Jews, but they did not recognize Jesus as such. The one who was not supposed to be able to recognize the presence of God in Jesus, did so and said thank you, for the gift of healing to the giver of the gift. Jesus' response was simple – "Get up, and go on your way. Your faith has made you well... your faith has made you whole."

Imagine! This was the leper made whole who returned in gratitude, even when in so many settings he was not welcomed. All this poor soul had at that moment was Jesus. He couldn't go to the priests. And yet, he had the grace to say thank you. He had the faith to see not just the healing, but also healer, God in Christ.

Theologian Karl Barth said that the basic human response to God is gratitude, not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving-gratefulness. To have faith is to live faith, and to live faith is to give thanks. Living into a life of gratitude is to live a life of faith.

So, yes, the posture of gratitude in all circumstances is a must, because it is the will of God and the life of faith, but I must say, it is easier said than done. It is easier to complain and grumble, don't you agree? The Bible's word for ingratitude is grumbling. Paul tells the Corinthians not to complain and grumble, reminding them that that's what the Israelites did when they wandered in the desert after they were freed from Egypt and the consequences of grumbling were not pretty – some of the people died. In spite such warnings it is easier to complain and grumble– the Corinthians did. We do it too. After all, problems tend to get in our faces ... and under our skin. Reasons for being grateful aren't always so obvious either. Sometimes we really have to work to find something to be grateful for.

One of the reasons that I put had the little piece of paper called "Gratitude Prompts" put in your bulletins today, is because we sometimes need a prompt to recognize what is good. I hope you will take it home and use it.

With that said, when was the last time that you counted your blessings?

You know, I believe that Jesus knew how to live in gratitude. We have several hints of that, but one big hint is what we now call the Last Supper. Jesus took bread and gave thanks, blessed it and broke it and gave it to the disciples. That one blessing wasn't it. It didn't cover the whole meal. When he took the cup, what did he do, he blessed it and gave thanks again. We know that every devout Jewish person was committed to two daily forms of prayer. One was of those forms of prayer was called the 18 Benedictions. In Hebrew a benediction simply is a prayer that begins with "blessed." To bless is to speak well of somebody. The spiritual practice of the 18 Benedictions, to be said 3 times a day, was to help people do what is the will of God – which is to give thanks in all circumstances. The first three were about God – and would be prayers such as "Blessed are you, God of history, or God of nature. Prayers 4 through 9 would be more personal in nature such as blessed are you, God,

for healing. Prayers 10 through 15 were national petitions, blessed are you, God, for your righteous reign, blessed are you for the whole our home. And the last three are about worship, like blessed are you, God for hearing prayer.

This morning, I'd like to challenge you to pray your own benedictions. Now, starting with 18 may be overwhelming. Perhaps you can work up to 18 at a time. Perhaps the Gratitude Prompts will help you recognize your blessings. This doesn't have to be rocket science. The things that you thank God for can be simple, like the water you drink, the air you breathe, the laughter that you just heard, the new day and the possibilities it holds, even dirty dishes, because they remind you that you have a home, and dishes and food.

Gratitude, like all the other things in life, becomes easier when we practice it. As someone once said, "we cannot choose to be happy, but we can choose to be grateful." Yes, maybe there's always something you can complain about, but there's also always something to be grateful about.