

Thank God: Becoming More Grateful to the God of All Grace

What Do You Have that You Did Not Receive?

Some years ago, my wife and daughters and I migrated to the wild and wonderful land of Australia. Part of the moving process was taking a complete inventory of our house. After weeks of counting and tallying, then seeing it all packed into hundreds of cardboard boxes, it became clear how much ‘stuff’ we have!

And filling that sea container were only our material possessions, of course, the things that we perhaps value the least of all. What *else* do we have? Things impossible to quantify or describe, impossible to count. For instance, we have a huge collection of memories. We also have the rich blessings of relationships. Each of us has various talents, and lessons that we’ve learned, and plans we’ve planned. We have so much.

And then we have God. Not that we can hold onto him like our favorite book, but in a very real sense, God is ours, and we are His. Through this relationship comes an entire universe of blessing: adoption, forgiveness, renewal, wisdom, fellowship, and everlasting life. A full inventory of God’s gifts would be impossible.

That brings us to the question Paul poses to the Corinthians in his first letter. He asks them: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). It’s a question for *all* of us to reflect on. When I look at all the many things that I have, how much was given to me by another? Yes, what do I have *that I did not receive*?

Now, I could answer that question superficially. Looking at the home inventory, I could say that with my own money I purchased almost every single one of my many books, for example, and our TV, the bed linens, and nearly everything else too. I didn’t receive it all, but I bought and acquired these things in various ways.

But really, what is the *source* of all things in your life? What is the origin of life itself? And then we need to see that everything we have, and everything we are, has been given. What do I have that I did not receive? Absolutely nothing. God’s gifts have abounded throughout my life, and even long before that, as He prepared and accomplished my salvation through Christ. I have always been on the receiving end. And this leaves just one response: gratitude. So what have you received? What are *you* thankful for?

Give Thanks

When we’ve been given something special, we all know gratitude is the right attitude. From early in a child’s life, parents will seek to engrain the habit of saying thanks. This is also true for our relationship with God. Thanksgiving is the sinner’s grateful response in heart and life to the loving works of the Triune God.

And just like parents expect their children to be grateful, so God expects this from those He made in His image. He often commands thanksgiving in the Scriptures, such as in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “Give thanks in all circumstances” (cf. Ps 107:1; Eph 5:20). It is commanded, but thanksgiving also becomes our joyful instinct. One who has received much from God actually comes to delight in gratitude.

And a truly grateful response to God is more than an emotion. You know that our feelings so rapidly change, our emotion subsides. Which means that the good things that have been granted are soon taken for granted. We want to develop the ability to give thanks in all circumstances, because that will honour the Lord.

As we explore gratitude, we recognize that we’re not able to repay God for all his goodness toward us. This is what the Psalmist asks in Psalm 116, “What shall I render to

the LORD for all His benefits toward me?” (v. 12). What can I ever give to the One who has given so much? Of course I cannot reimburse Him, but I can praise Him.

The Good and Gracious Giver

There’s a big difficulty about becoming more grateful. The trouble is that the human heart doesn’t naturally want to recognize God. In fact, ingratitude is part of the basic equipment of sinful mankind. In Romans 1, Paul describes our total depravity. And I find it very striking that *ingratitude* is prominent among our sins listed there. Although we see God’s glorious existence displayed in His creation, mankind has withheld worship from him.

Mankind’s response to God has been very wrong. Listen to what Paul says: “Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, *nor were thankful*, but became futile in their thoughts” (Rom 1:21). Despite receiving so many gifts from the Creator, our first parents did not glorify God or thank Him but rejected the Giver. They were ungrateful.

This is not how it should be. James 1:17 points to the source of all the good things that fill the lives of God’s children: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.” You can hear that it is in God’s nature to be generous toward His creatures, particularly toward His children in Christ. The Belgic Confession says that God is the overflowing fountain of all good (Article 1).

So true thankfulness means that we need to keep our focus on God, on His goodness and grace. If our eyes are opened to Him, we’ll come to see the truth of Lamentations 3: “Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness” (Lam 3:22-23). God’s goodness toward us is ever-new. And that fact teaches us to value His gifts afresh each day. Even if you have always had three square meals, a comfortable house to inhabit, and people to love—and even if you’ve always known Christ as our Saviour—these blessings should keep their brightness in our minds and hearts, as God’s daily mercies.

And the most profound motivation for gratitude arises by considering the reason *why* God has been so good. We echo the words of David, “Who am I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that you have brought me this far?” (2 Sam 7:18). Do you ever ask a similar question? Who am I, that God has been so good to me? If you see that you have received absolutely everything, it is good to ponder why God has showered you with blessing.

This question becomes even weightier when we think about what God owes us. What are you entitled to? Because of our sin, we haven’t earned a single blessing. Instead, we have merited God’s condemnation. Yet God is generous in giving for Jesus’s sake. It is especially through glorying in Christ that our thanksgiving will be deepened and strengthened! When Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:15 says, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift,” the gift of which he is thinking is Christ. In Christ we have our greatest treasure.

Let Me Count the Ways

So whether we are young or old, struggling right now or flourishing, here is the challenge: to be truly aware of how God has blessed us, and to sincerely thank Him. Some of God’s gifts are notable, and many appear minuscule. But Charles Spurgeon gives us wise counsel: “Let us daily praise God for common mercies—common as we frequently call them, and yet so priceless that when deprived of them we are ready to perish.”

Any list of God’s gifts will range widely. It will encompass everything from material objects, to relational blessings, to God’s spiritual gifts, to opportunities for work and rest. The number and diversity of the Father’s gifts will be astonishing.

In the months of working on my book on gratitude, I made it a regular practice to ask people what they were thankful for. Sometimes when I asked the ‘thankful question,’ without a moment’s hesitation a person would answer by quickly suggesting a dozen or more things—this, and that, and these things—and then pause as if to say, “How many more do you want?” God’s blessings will always be more than our best efforts to count.

Even so, it is good for us to take stock, to keep track, to write it down. Such an exercise helps in our daily struggle against ingratitude. Counting his gifts moves us to give God the glory and thanks that belong to him. Listen to what William Law once said: “Would you know him who is the greatest saint in the world? It is not he who prays most or fasts most; it is not he who gives most alms, but it is he who is always thankful to God, who receives everything as an instance of God’s goodness and has a heart always ready to praise God for it.” So, for example, what kinds of things am I thankful for? I am grateful for:

- my congregation
- the gift of prayer
- my wife Rebecca
- good health care in this country
- a nice home to live in
- the Scriptures
- my baptism
- good books and good music
- my daily job as a pastor
- coffee
- loyal friends
- my godly parents and godly parents-in-law
- sleep
- a body that works like it’s supposed to

I am convinced that no child of God can grow in her gratitude without regularly recounting the LORD’s many gifts. A believer’s life will be overwhelmed with the Lord’s goodness. With open eyes and a grateful heart, we begin the never-ending task of counting our blessings.

A Grateful Heart and Life

So how do we show thanksgiving? Take a moment to remember a time when you received a wonderful gift or an amazing act of kindness. You might have discovered that sometimes there is nothing to do but say “thank you.” And then consider again our position and privilege. We were desperately low because of our sins—bound for eternal torment—but we were lifted up so wonderfully by God’s grace in Christ. So what are some ways that we can live out our thanksgiving to God?

Thanksgiving Prayers

Words often seem cheap. Next to the precious gifts that we received, passing prayers appear a small thing, insignificant. Yet here is the truth: the Father delights to hear His little children say ‘thank you.’ The Old Testament contains countless prayers of thanksgiving. In 1 Chronicles 29:13, for example, David prays: “Now, our God, we thank you and we praise your glorious name.”

Grateful prayers also feature in the New Testament. For instance, there are the many places where Paul thanks God for particular gifts. And remarkably, the apostles consider thanksgiving to be simultaneous with the Christian's prayer. So often Scripture says that we should pray "*with* thanksgiving." So even as we make many requests about this trouble or that need in our life, we should saturate our prayers with gratitude. Consider three passages:

- "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, *with thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4:2).
- "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it *with thanksgiving*" (Col 4:2).
- "I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and *giving of thanks* be made for all men" (1 Tim 2:1).

Do you see how the New Testament portrays gratitude as a core ingredient in all true prayer? With good reason the Catechism calls prayer "the most important part of the thankfulness that God requires of us" (Q&A 116). Having received so much in Christ, His people ought to give thanks to God in prayer. That means with sincere words, and specific words, we thank God.

Songs of Thanksgiving

Our prayers are often quiet and unseen. But gratitude is also expressed through songs of thanksgiving. Scripture portrays God's people as a singing people. The keynote theme of Scripture is the great and marvelous works of God. So it is fitting that thankfulness be our chorus and refrain. Paul writes in Ephesians, "Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord, *giving thanks always* to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (5:19-20).

Even if you *can't* sing, or you don't *like* to sing, give praise to the LORD. Gratefully sing with your family around the dinner table. Sing with your friends. Sing in church. Have a favourite song of praise in your heart all week long. Deeply felt thankfulness produces a sound from our voices that is robust and enthusiastic. God delights when we take a song onto our lips and offer it in humble gratitude and sincere praise: "Sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16, NIV).

Thankful Giving

Thanksgiving is also witnessed in our giving. When the overflowing fountain of all good pours out generously, God's gifts should overflow from us toward other people. God's blessings cause *us* to be a blessing. True gratitude isn't only one-directional, from earth up to heaven. Gratitude also activates us in the midst of our earthly relationships. If we are thankful to God, this leads us to love and serve the people He has placed in our life.

Indeed, God's grace must never stop with us, but we must pass it on. If grace is like a sound, it must echo and re-echo. If grace is like a stone thrown into a pond, the ripples must keep spreading. God's grace should turn me into a gracious person. My thankfulness to God should make other people thankful for me. So I give: my money, my time, myself, my gifts and love. By giving I show my humble gratitude.

Thankful Living

Is our gratitude like the icing on a cupcake, or is it like the mashed up banana in a slice of banana bread? We sometimes think of gratitude as the topping on our day: a thankful

prayer, a glad song of worship around the table, a nice thank you card, a word of appreciation—such things are like a layer of icing added after everything else. But gratitude ought to be like the banana which permeates your favorite loaf, when it is mixed and commingled with all the other ingredients. Gratitude isn't the final layer on a life of blessing, but it is basic to our life, part of its very flavor and color.

Consider how Paul intertwines thanksgiving into the whole Christian life: “And *whatever you do* in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks to God the Father through Him*” (Col 3:17). In all we say or do, it should be evident that we are grateful to God.

After the Catechism explores the misery of human guilt, and then unfolds God's grace in Christ, it asks, “Why must we yet do good works?” (Q&A 86). And a key part of the answer: “So that with our whole life we may show ourselves *thankful* to God, and He may be praised by us” (Q&A 86). We want to thank God with our whole life lived in obedience to his Word, with thankfulness—with worship and adoration—as a lifestyle.

Thankful in Suffering

By now, someone probably wants to ask: “But can a person *always* be thankful?” We've spent a lot of time counting and celebrating the good things of the Lord. But life isn't always so cheery and bright. Jesus tells us, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). And suffering does come: trouble in your mental health and physical health, strife in your relationships, stress on family finances, division in the church, and all the temptations and hostility of an unbelieving world. When we are in the thick of hardship, God's grace and goodness can appear as a distant reality. So can a person thank the Lord always?

A while ago we started with the Lord's command in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks.” It's a message that we love to print on coffee mugs. But two additional words in that verse transform it into a serious challenge; the Spirit says, “Give thanks *in everything*.” This command means being grateful, even when we don't feel grateful.

How can that be? The key that unlocks this difficult verse comes in its next phrase: “for this is the will of God *in Christ Jesus* for you.” It is through faith in Christ that we can always live in gratitude to God. We are thankful, because in Christ, God is the Father who loves us, who keeps his promises, and who saves us from sin. This is an unchanging reality, no matter what happens.

And when we belong to Christ, we start to look at our sufferings in a different way. Maybe you have learned how Christ shapes us by our suffering—He teaches us perseverance, and hope, and trust—and shows us that we can depend utterly on him, even when it feels like we have nothing left. This is how James can exhort us, “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials” (Jas 1:2). Count it a joy—look at it as a gift—because Christ has given us a hope which is steadfast and eternal. When we live by faith, we can have a spirit of thanksgiving that does not die. Thanking God “in all circumstances” will be hard, but in Christ it will be possible.

Gratitude Undermined

It's not that difficult to express our gratitude. We do it at the dinner table and even to strangers at the coffee shop. It's easy, and it's right. In fact, we can't stand it when people are ungrateful—like our children! Or our husbands, or friends. When they forget to say thanks for another delicious meal, for another carefully ironed shirt, or when it feels like they've taken us for granted, we get annoyed. But then we should also look in the mirror. Sad to say, but all of us have a weak commitment to thankfulness.

Forgetting to Thank God

Sometimes we simply forget to thank God. Scripture recounts a striking story about this kind of forgetfulness. One day Jesus meets ten men with leprosy (Luke 17:11-19). In their dire need, they cry for help, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (v. 13). And in His compassion-filled response, Jesus sends the ten men to the priest.

As the lepers depart, they are suddenly healed: their skin is transformed from being black and mushy and without feeling, to being pink and healthy and alive. For the lepers, this was more than a marvelous restoration of health, it was life-changing. But only one of the lepers, a Samaritan, returns. Coming to Jesus, he “fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks” (v. 16).

Jesus asks what must have been on the mind of everyone present: “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?” (v. 17). We don’t know. Maybe one went to celebrate. Maybe another was too shy to approach. Another might have been too proud. Wherever the other men were, only one remembered to thank the Lord.

We’re shocked by the ingratitude of the nine men. Yet we’re all guilty of the same ingratitude, as often as we forget to thank God for His good gifts. We receive so much, yet we say little. And where does our gratitude disappear to? Perhaps it’s swallowed up in the happy moment of enjoying God’s gift. Perhaps we have good intentions to say thank you later. Perhaps we simply forget, because our mind is frail and our spirit is weak.

Let us live in the humble spirit of the healed leper. *Remember* what God has given you. Notice it, and then make it your priority to thank God. When we see ourselves as redeemed by grace, we should resolve to give constant praise to the Lord.

Other Ways Our Gratitude is Undermined

1) We turn God’s gifts into idols.

God’s blessings so often arouse in us the temptation to idolatry. We actually turn God’s gifts against Him by idolizing the good things He’s given. God gives money, and we trust in what money can buy. God gives a husband, and we find security in his physical or emotional strength. God gives us a talent, and we find our worth in what we do. But instead of worshipping created things, let us always fix our eyes on the Creator. Thank him for his good gifts, and then use his gifts to his glory, not your own.

2) We act entitled.

The attitude of entitlement is instinctive to all our hearts. From a very young age, even our children are keen to get what they think is theirs, what they deserve. That hardly changes. We reckon that God owes us our good health, or owes us our happiness, or a nice holiday, or even owes us salvation itself. And if we think (deep down) that we deserve good things from God, we won’t be grateful for His blessings. If we feel entitled, we might even complain about what we have received, or have a critical spirit about it. But let’s realize how we live by grace alone.

3) We take it for granted.

It’s a familiar pattern, that very soon after receiving a blessing, we stop appreciating it. Think of the Israelites in the wilderness, taking for granted God’s gift of manna. We do this all the

time. God gives us improved health after an illness, or He gives a good friend, or a new beginning, or some other gift—and we soon act like we’ve always had this. Even if it’s a really precious gift, we don’t thank the Lord. But don’t take things for granted, but receive them with gratitude.

4) We take the credit.

Few things kill gratitude as quickly as pride. Looking at what we possess or who we are, we think that we’ve earned it ourselves. In Deuteronomy 8, Moses is afraid that once they’re in the Promised Land, the people will say, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth” (v. 17). Easily we can push God to the margins of our life. For example, our relationship with God is a credit to the effort we’re putting into it: reading the Scriptures, praying regularly, going to church. Or we think about our well-behaved children: “All those parenting books we’ve read must have helped.” Whenever you’re tempted to take the credit, remember that God gives the ability for every good activity. There is no room for boasting, but we should give all the tribute to God.

Instead of letting our gratitude be undermined, let’s learn how to excel in thankfulness.

How to Excel in Thankfulness

Scripture says that our thanksgiving needs to grow. It’s a life-long project. In Colossians 2:6-7, the Spirit exhorts us to walk in Christ, “rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, *abounding in it with thanksgiving.*” Literally, the Spirit says, ‘Excel in thanksgiving.’ If you are going to be good at something, be good at this. You received everything, you’re utterly dependent on God, so you should excel at giving Him the glory.

Mastering any activity, whether playing the cello or baking bread, requires deliberate effort. So also for our gratitude. It takes continual motivation and attention to keep it conscious and lively. What are some things we can do to improve and abound in thankfulness?

See Your Blessings

Here’s a great quotation for you: “The power of gratitude is the ability to see the good.” In short, you need to notice the good things all around you. Listen again to what the Holy Spirit says in Colossians, “Continue earnestly in prayer, *being vigilant in it with thanksgiving*” (4:2). Vital to the practice of prayer is vigilance—open eyes—praying with watchfulness and attentiveness. Each day it is right to notice God’s goodness, and then to thank Him. When we see the gifts, we are being prepared to see the Giver.

So we should take notice of the Father’s generosity. For what specific gifts and blessings are you thankful to God? Keep thinking about it, until your list becomes really long! And then pray in thanksgiving for God’s kindness.

As a pastor, I’ve talked to believers who were sick and dying and who yet modeled this grateful spirit. They insisted on counting their blessings, even the ‘small’ things like a warm house and a good night’s sleep. And their words gave testimony to how they learned to focus not on what is physical or material. They learned to set the eyes of their heart not on what is seen, but on what lasts forever. May we all be vigilant in thanksgiving.

Savor Your Blessings

We said we have a tendency to take God's gifts for granted. We can overcome this by actually pausing to savor His blessings. Linger over them. Delight in them. Take time to appreciate God's goodness. Savoring something means that when one of God's gifts bring us pleasure, we should acknowledge it to the LORD.

An obvious occasion for savoring God's blessings is in His gift of daily bread. If your household is like ours, then mealtimes sometimes feels like a mad rush to inhale the food, with little time for chewing. No one likes soggy breakfast cereal, or lukewarm potatoes, so we eat in a hurry. But surely our mealtimes would benefit from a slower pace to help us enjoy the pleasure of good food. Sit down, slow down, and notice the pleasure of God's gift of food. Ecclesiastes says, "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart" (9:7). Savor the tokens of God's goodness and let them move you to gratitude.

Another gift to savor is other people. God blesses us immensely through those He has brought into our life: a devoted friend, a loving spouse, a child or parent. In my pride, I sometimes think that my life would be easier if everyone was more like me. But if I everyone was like me, my life would be terribly boring! And so I strive to appreciate the qualities of other people: the sound of their laughter, their positive outlook on things, their interesting viewpoints. Other people can make our life harder, but also far richer and more diverse.

Savoring God's blessings requires time and attentiveness. When we rush through our days, we'll hardly have occasion to enjoy His goodness. But when we slow down, we will have space to appreciate good gifts: the aroma of freshly-ground coffee beans, the simplicity of a piano sonata, the beauty of a Psalm, the stillness of a Sunday morning before church. Enjoy the moment and then offer thanksgiving to God.

Take Notice of Answered Prayers

We are grateful to have the privilege of prayer. So another way to cultivate a spirit of gratitude is to take notice when God answers our prayers. Often, it seems that we forget what we asked God for, and then we also forget to thank God when we do receive it.

For instance, we ask God for strength doing what we need to do. We pray that He would keep us from willful sin, or give us the endurance to stand at the front of the classroom all day, or wisdom for that meeting, or courage to face the appointment with the specialist. And we journey through our day without committing a grievous sin or melting into an anxious puddle, but we actually enjoy our work, and have the chance to bless someone with our words. God provided everything that we asked for, and much more.

But have we thanked Him for it? We show gratitude to God by noticing when He answers us: 'Thank you for helping me, like I asked. Thank you for encouraging my spirit, like I prayed this morning.' "Wherever there is true prayer, there thanksgiving and gratitude stand by, ready to respond to the answer when it comes." Take notice of answered prayers.

Speak of Your Blessings

We speak about what we cherish. A footie fanatic will love to relive the great matches won by his team. A lovestruck young man will find any occasion to mention his stunning girlfriend. Jesus puts it best, "For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). Maybe you know how for some people, gratitude arises naturally from their lips,

"It's a blessing how God has encouraged me lately through prayer."

"I am so grateful for the support of my children."

"Isn't all this rain we've been having such a gift from the Lord?"

Gratitude comes out of them, because it lives in them. Others hesitate to verbalize their gratitude to God. But it is good for all of us to speak of our blessings. To talk about something with gratitude requires us to pause, to think, to articulate what it is that we value about this person or that experience or gift. Speaking thankfully trains our mind to travel the pathway of gratitude. Speaking shapes our seeing. If you're thankful, tell someone. If your heart is full of God's goodness, let it come out. By declaring God's works, we learn to excel in gratitude.

What if you had not received...?

We began asking: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor 4:7). Seeing and savouring God's many blessings prompts us to gratitude. But a variation on the question can also be helpful: "What if you had *not* received...?" Think again about how God has blessed you. Choose one or more of his gifts, and just imagine what life would be like if God had not given them. For instance:

What if I had not received two working legs, or two hands?
 What if I did not belong to a loving church community?
 What if I didn't have the Scriptures as a light to my path?
 What if I knew about God, but did not have faith?
 What if I hadn't married my spouse?
 What if the Lord had not been on my side?
 What if I didn't live in a country where there is peace, law, and order?
 What if God hadn't led my life in the way He has?

For most of us, these are hypothetical questions. When we have long enjoyed the gifts of God, we can't imagine life without them. But when we ponder their *absence*, we start to realize how precious they are. Without these blessings, we would struggle in unspeakable ways. So we thank God for what we have.

And indeed, we could lose our legs, and lose our job, and lose our freedom, but we cannot lose our salvation. And so we are grateful. If we had not received God's grace in Christ Jesus, we would have nothing, and we would be nothing. But God has blessed us richly in him.

God knows we cannot repay His abounding goodness. We can never reimburse him. Yet we are left with one main task. It's why we are here, and it's what we get to do for eternity: abound with thanksgiving to our Triune God. So get really good at it. Shine in your praise. Excel in your gratitude! Such thankfulness will glorify God, who is the overflowing fountain of all good.