

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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United by Gratitude

Colossians 3:12-17

Earlier this week, a friend and I were swapping stories about the challenges and frustrations of gathering leaves. Like myself, he has recently spent a lot of time clearing foliage from his yard. We agreed that one of the most discouraging parts is the quantity of leaves that's continually falling even as we're diligently trying to remove what's already on the ground. No matter which method we're using—raking, leaf blower, or a lawn tractor with a bagger—there's no way to keep up. What sustains us is the knowledge that eventually, all the leaves will have fallen, the tree limbs will be bare, and the job will be done, for this year. Unless, of course, there are still leaves on the ground in your neighbor's yard, now blowing over into your yard.

It's important to note that my friend and I were having this conversation while standing outside, on a gorgeous sunny afternoon, under a crystal clear sky. In the midst of commiserating over our leaf issues, we still managed to acknowledge the beauty of the season and the wonder of the world God has made. The abundance of God's goodness was all around us. So my friend was right to close the conversation by saying, "Yeah, with the weather as nice as it is, don't we always seem to find something to complain about." Up until that point in our conversation, the two of us had been united by our grumbling. But by the time we went our separate ways, the grumbling had been replaced by gratitude.

I see a similar dynamic going on in today's text from Colossians, where Paul is reminding his fellow believers of who they are and how they should behave. Paul has just finished describing their identity and way of life before they came to faith in Jesus Christ. Their lives were filled with enmity and idolatry. Their conduct was marked by sexual immorality, greed, and all kinds of sinful speech. That was then, says Paul. But now, as people who have entered God's new creation, where things are different, they too are to be different. "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (v. 12). Notice how Paul employs the imagery of taking off one thing and putting on something else as a way to describe their new life in Christ. When it comes to your attitude and actions, get rid of this, and replace it with this. And most of all, says Paul, clothe yourselves with love, which bonds all the other virtues to one another and holds you together in the community of God's new people.

This brings us to the part of today's text that I want us to focus on most, verses 15-17. Here Paul offers a vision of church life as a harmonious community of people renewed in the image of Christ, living together as a sign and preview of the new humanity that God has brought into existence through Jesus' death and resurrection. And as Paul admonishes his fellow believers in how to conduct themselves, he keeps coming back to the importance of thankfulness.

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. *And be thankful*" (v. 15). Notice how thankfulness is tied to what God has accomplished through Christ. Earlier in this letter, Paul says, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free of accusation..." (1:21-22). Brothers and sisters, we're here

today, as people remade in Christ, because of God's forgiveness and reconciling love toward us, and toward the world. God's faithfulness and mercy, revealed most fully and decisively in Jesus' death for your sins and my sins, are the reason for our life together. Through Christ, God has brought about peace, and has brought us into this new order of peace. No wonder we're told to let the peace of Christ reign in our hearts, not just in the sense of an inner peace, though that's important, but most of all in an outward peace where we live as reconciled members of one body. In the midst of all that can threaten that oneness, the peace that we have with God and with one another is an absolute miracle. No wonder we're called to be thankful.

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name" (Ps. 100:4). With those words we were called together in God's presence this morning. We're called to express gratitude for all his gifts and blessings, especially during the annual Thanksgiving emphasis. But every time we gather, as well as when we're scattered, our hearts are to be full of gratitude not only for God's daily mercies but most of all for the mercy of Christ. There is no greater gift from above than the salvation we have in him.

That's why we're here with hymnals open, singing. That's why we're here with heads bowed, praying. That's why we're here with ears tuned in, preaching. That's why we're here with hands outspread, giving. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," says Paul, "as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs *with gratitude in your hearts to God*" (v. 16). Gratitude is what animates and drives our praise.

There has been a growing body of research that ties gratitude to a number of positive emotional and physical benefits. One article summarized the research this way:

Adults who frequently feel grateful have more energy, more optimism, more social connections and more happiness than those who do not, according to studies conducted over the past decade. They're also less likely to be depressed, envious, greedy, or alcoholics. They earn more money, sleep more soundly, exercise more regularly, and have greater resistance to viral infections.

These kinds of benefits weren't just evident in adults. Researchers also found that gratitude has similar positive outcomes in children and adolescents. They concluded, "A lot of these findings are things we learned in kindergarten or our grandmothers told us, but now we have scientific evidence to prove them.... The key is not to leave it on the Thanksgiving table."¹

So it sounds like these Sunday morning worship gatherings, especially the ways that we cultivate and express gratitude, are good for us, in more ways than one. All this praising God may even be helping you build up your immunity. But note that in whatever ways our human well-being may be enhanced by Sunday morning practices of gratitude, the primary reason for thankfulness is God. In fact, Christian gratitude, by its very nature, helps keep us God-centered rather than self-centered. As William Temple wrote:

It is probable that in most of us the spiritual life is impoverished and stunted because we give so little place to gratitude. It is more important to thank God for blessings received than to pray for them beforehand. For that forward-looking prayer, though right as an expression of dependence upon God, is still self-centered in part, at least, of its interest; there is something we hope to gain by our prayer. But the backward-looking act of thanksgiving is quite free from this. In itself it is quite selfless. Thus it is akin to love. All our love to God is in response to his love for us; it never starts on our side. "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).²

Thankfulness, Paul reminds us, is the appropriate response to what God has already done for us in Christ. The peace of Christ calls for gratitude, and gratitude takes the form of worship.

But thankful worship is inseparable from thankful living. Paul concludes today's text, "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*" (v. 17). Notice how Paul's choice of words is very comprehensive. "Whatever you do." "Word *and* deed." "Do *it all*." Our life in Christ can't be compartmentalized, such that gratitude only comes into play on certain matters. No, gratitude is always in the picture, wherever we are, whatever our circumstances, whatever the relationship, experience, or event. What we think, what we say, what we do, all these things are to be expressions of our thankfulness to God.

In the Broadway play *My Fair Lady*, Eliza is courted by a man named Freddy. Freddy expresses his affection for her by writing her love letters every day. But Eliza grows frustrated with all these written promises, and cries out: "Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! Don't talk of stars burning above! If you're in love, show me! Don't talk of love lasting through time. Make no undying vow. If you love me, show me now!" All our words of gratitude to God, offered here in worship, or in our daily practices of prayer and devotion, will ring hollow in his ears unless we also show our thanks by our actions. Living thankfully is what reveals the true depth and integrity of our gratitude for the peace of Christ.

To be honest, there are times and experiences in our lives when we may not feel very grateful. One of the benefits of Thanksgiving Day is that it calls for us to focus on the significance of gratitude, giving it more time and thought. This helps stimulate our emotional inclination to offer thanks. It's good to have a day like this Thursday that underlines the value of expressing appreciation for life's gifts and blessings, and moves us to show it. But as people who are being renewed in the image of Christ, we know that gratitude is also a year-round discipline. Day in and day out, even when we may not feel a sense of thankfulness, time and study and experience have taught that we should act to show gratitude, in some concrete way, and in most cases the emotional part will follow. Again, thankful *living* is the supreme expression of appreciation to God.

And isn't that what Paul is ultimately after in today's text. He's not just trying to offer helpful tips on the psychological benefits of gratitude. He's trying to take these being-saved sinners, who need more transformation into the likeness of Christ, and turn them into a unit, where everyone is on equal footing, inhabiting the peace of Christ and held together by the love of God. And one of the keys to being that kind of community of believers is thankfulness.

Theologian and reformer Martin Luther once said, "To thank with all your heart is an art—an art which the Holy Spirit teaches. And you need not worry that the man who can really say 'Deo gratias' (to God be thanks) with all his heart will be proud, stubborn, rough, and tough, or will work against God with His gifts."³ Remember that Paul is admonishing his fellow believers to put away old attitudes and actions, and to take on new attitudes and actions that reflect the way of Christ. And Paul knows that in God's will and way, thankfulness has a way of driving out those things that work against the peace of Christ and the unity of the church. Put simply, gratitude helps hold us together as God's people. So "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."

¹ Melinda Beck, "Thank you. No, Thank You." *The Wall Street Journal* (November 23, 2010).

² William Temple, from 3000 Quotations on Christian Themes. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, No. 17.

³ Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 17.