

## **The Christian To-Do List: Gratitude**

### **What is Gratitude?**

The state of being grateful; thankfulness.

It's more than just saying "thank you", it's a personal acknowledgement of God's blessings.

### **Psalm 75:1-2**

1We give thanks to you, O God;  
we give thanks, for your name is near.  
We recount your wondrous deeds.

We all know that gratitude is a good thing, but I hope that when we're done today, you'll see it as something that needs to be actively practiced in your life.

### **The Science**

According to Dr. Andrew Huberman, a neuroscientist and professor at Stanford School of Medicine, gratitude is considered a "pro-social" behavior.

Pro-Social behaviors are basically any behavior or mode of thinking that allow us to be more effective in interactions with other people, including ourselves. These behaviors bring us closer to the details in interactions. It can be as trivial as eating a great burger or as meaningful as sharing a moment with our spouse or kids.

There are neural circuits that are wired for these behaviors as opposed to defensive behaviors, which try to shield us from interactions. The circuits for defensive behaviors are actually more robust because they're designed to keep us safe. We're all wired to be wary of our surroundings - and because that's practiced over and over again, that "muscle", to completely botch anatomy, is more exercised and powerful.

Defensive behaviors seem to almost come naturally.

However, incorporating a gratitude practice can start to tilt that scale toward better interactions - enabling us to get closer to the details of life, and of God, that can bring us joy.

If the secular world can figure this out, surely a people who believe in an almighty, gracious, merciful and loving God can as well. What would happen if we truly incorporated a God-centered gratitude into our lives?

How much closer to the "details" of God could we be?

With gratitude, can we bring our biology into play to bring us closer to God? Science and faith intertwined?

### **When do we practice Gratitude?**

#### **I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

Rejoice always, 17pray without ceasing, 18give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

## Gratitude in the Good Times

When do you count your blessings most?

Do you look around, things are going great, acknowledge the blessings from God and thank him?

### James 1:17

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

### Repeated through the Psalms

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

That seems to be a natural reaction.

## Gratitude in the Bad Times

### Lamentations 3:1-24

1 I am the man who has seen affliction  
under the rod of his wrath;  
2 he has driven and brought me  
into darkness without any light;  
3 surely against me he turns his hand  
again and again the whole day long.  
4 He has made my flesh and my skin  
waste away;  
he has broken my bones;  
5 he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;  
6 he has made me dwell in darkness  
like the dead of long ago.  
7 He has walled me about so that I  
cannot escape;  
he has made my chains heavy;  
8 though I call and cry for help,  
he shuts out my prayer;  
9 he has blocked my ways with blocks  
of stones; he has made my paths  
crooked.  
10 He is a bear lying in wait for me,  
a lion in hiding;  
11 he turned aside my steps and tore  
me to pieces;  
he has made me desolate;  
12 he bent his bow and set me  
as a target for his arrow.

13 He drove into my kidneys  
the arrows of his quiver;  
14 I have become the laughingstock of  
all peoples,  
the object of their taunts all day long.  
15 He has filled me with bitterness;  
he has sated me with wormwood.  
16 He has made my teeth grind on  
gravel,  
and made me cower in ashes;  
17 my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
18 so I say, "My endurance has  
perished;  
so has my hope from the Lord."  
19 Remember my affliction and my  
wanderings,  
the wormwood and the gall!  
20 My soul continually remembers it  
and is bowed down within me.  
21 But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
22 The steadfast love of the Lord never  
ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end;  
23 they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
24 "The Lord is my portion," says my  
soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

Is there a better example of how we feel when the world just beats us down - when it seems life just keeps getting darker and is about to swallow us whole?

Gratitude in these times is not as natural, but can be more powerful. How many times have you recounted your blessings when the world was turning to chaos around you?

Did that change your outlook, or at least bring some peace during that time?

## **Gratitude in the Ugly Times**

Do we and can we find gratitude in those times where we aren't living up to God's standard?  
When we find ourselves wallowing in sinful behavior?

### **Psalm 51:9-15**

Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.  
10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.  
11 Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.  
13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.  
15 O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.

### **Hebrews 12:7-9**

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?

### **Psalm 119:162-165**

162 I rejoice at your word  
like one who finds great spoil.  
163 I hate and abhor falsehood,  
but I love your law.  
164 Seven times a day I praise you  
for your righteous rules.  
165 Great peace have those who love your law;  
nothing can make them stumble.

We may not always obey the rules, but at the end of the day, we should be grateful that God loves us enough to set forth rules and discipline us as heirs to his promise. It's not easy, but it's essential.

We also can be grateful that he is patient with us. We've studied about God's patience in our Wednesday night class. When I mess up, I'm incredibly grateful that He is patient and merciful with me.

All of this of course pales in comparison to being grateful that Christ came to take away the sin of the world. We couldn't even begin to have this conversation on gratitude without that sacrifice. Nothing else would matter.

### **More Than a Personal Practice**

Gratitude is more than just an individual/personal behavior and exercise. Dr. Huberman says that we can actually further boost our pro-social behavior circuits, overcoming darkness and defensiveness in our lives, by hearing people who are grateful for us and even to hear people who have been grateful for others.

What type of environment does this sound like? The church? Our Bible class? Small groups? Our Family?

#### Family

Starting from the smallest group, do you - in your family - talk about how you are grateful for each other? Do you recognize each other in some way?

#### Small Group

What better time is there to reach out to others and make them feel loved and know that you are grateful for them than Small Group? I would say most of us are in groups that we already feel some connection to. If in James it says to confess our sins one to another, how do we do that if we can't confess our gratitude to one another first?

#### The Church

And then our corporate worship - Spencer usually has somebody he's thankful for or speaking highly of before he gives his lesson. The elders sometimes have some bit of praise in their announcements. And Blake Lamberson's letter from Sandra last week was full of gratitude. How many of you felt incredible after he read that - even if you weren't on that list?

### **Hebrews 10:22-24**

...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...

We need to let others know that we're thankful for them - even the smallest praise and have a huge effect. Remember, gratitude helps us to lean into our relationship with God, others, and even ourselves. The thanks you give can alter that person's day and life in incredible ways.

### **The Importance of Knowing the Bible for Gratitude**

We spoke earlier of the secular world coming to the conclusion that gratitude is a wonderful expression to stimulate our brains toward positive behaviors. We also mentioned that if those who have no knowledge or relationship with God can have a gratitude practice - how much more can we?

In order to harness stories of gratitude, they have to be encapsulated in just that - stories, narrative. It just so happens that we have a book full of the works of God and his interactions with man that should give us gratitude fodder for our entire lives.

What parts of the Bible can you think of that would cause a moment of gratitude in your life?

We see how Noah and his family were saved and the gratitude even God had for Noah that he was righteous.

We can read the psalms of David and read the accounts of his gratitude toward God. His gratitude and love toward Jonathan and his resulting favor toward Mephibosheth. >>>>>

We read Job - the terrible things that happened to him, but the steadfastness he employed.

Of course we see the miracles of Jesus and then his sacrifice for us and all of humanity.

We have to be in the Word to see these examples. And they're powerful examples if we let them.

It's so easy to read them as just stories. Can we find the gratitude? Can we soften our hearts to FEEL as we read? It's not always easy, but that's one of the purposes of the Bible.

### **Gratitude for Our Salvation**

Is it possible to find salvation and not feel gratitude?

Psychoanalysis time:

I'm very much of a head over heart kind of person. Yeah, I feel in ways and I'll get emotional about stuff. But for the most part I'm a pretty logical kind of guy. I grew up in a church that, I hate to say, was pretty legalistic. There was more nitpicking of ideas and squirrel-chasing through the details of the scriptures rather than speaking on application.

In many ways I want to FEEL the salvation Christ affords me. Many times I can only THINK about it. During communion I struggle with finding emotion for the crucifixion. Instead, I do my best to SAY that I am thankful and hope that I can be in touch with what that is supposed to do in my heart.

I'm not looking for a showing of hands, but does that ring a bell with anyone else?

I want to have gratitude for the ultimate gift.

We talk about how our kids are mirrors of ourselves. I get so mad that Adaline will receive a gift but not show that gratitude and thankfulness for it. I'm not sure how to or if there is a way to "fix" it.

But I look inward and feel that I can be that same way toward the gift of Jesus. But it's a point that I acknowledge and continue to attempt to connect emotion with the logic.

### **Gratitude for the People in Our Lives**

Many times when I am focused on gratitude, names and faces pop in my head more than anything else. These are folks that have made an impression on me throughout the years - though many times it's people who current around me that have "blessed" me in recent circumstances.

One practice I've started and failed time and time again - is keeping a list of people who I want to remember forever. I think this was a challenge by Spencer. But it comes from Paul -

### **Philippians 1:3-4**

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy...

I think the people that God has placed into our lives should be an essential part of our gratitude practice.

## **Increasing Our Gratitude**

### **Gratitude Training**

#### **Daily Journal**

Dr. Robert Emmons of the UC Davis and Dr. Michael McCollough of Southern Methodist University in Dallas:

“The first group kept a diary of the events that occurred during the day... the second group recorded their unpleasant experiences, [and] the last group made a daily list of things for which they were grateful.

The results of the study indicated that daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism and energy. Additionally, the gratitude group experienced less depression and stress, was more likely to help others, exercised more regularly and made more progress toward personal goals. According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved.

Ask yourself the following question each morning before getting out of bed:

#### **What am I truly grateful for in my life?**

Aim for five answers, and if you have trouble at first, ask yourself alternative probing questions such as:

- What relationships do I have that others don't?
- What do I take for granted?
- What freedoms, unique abilities, and options do I have that others don't?
- What advantages have I been given in life?
- Who has been supportive and has helped me to get to where I am?

#### **Six Degrees of Thankfulness**

A.J. Jacobs, a guest on the Tim Ferriss podcast explored the idea of gratitude and came up with an exercise (and wrote a book about it) calling it the “Six Degrees of Thankfulness”. Basically what he does is relate what he's thankful for to six different connections.

As simple as a great steak > restaurant/chef that cooked it > rancher > the money I had to buy it > the client who gave me work > the talents and skill God gave me to do what I do.

We can connect it all to God, but the pathway there can give us more threads to pull in our gratitude.

#### **Just Be Grateful - Morning and/or Night**

Though it would probably help me to start my day with gratitude, I'm more of a reflection type guy at night.

#### **Psalm 92:1-2**

1 It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; 2to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night,