

# GRATITUDE: The Greatest Feeling in the World

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**Theme:** Gratitude, Thanksgiving Day

**Text:** Ephesians 5:18-20

Dr. Lewis Smedes, a favorite seminary professor of mine, put into words the feelings of gratitude like I had never heard them before. Doris, Lew's wife, had found him lying on the floor, as he wrote, "looking quite dead." He lay in the hospital for a couple of days, tilting heavily in death's direction, lungs filled with blood clots as if they were buckshot. On the fourth day, his physician of Norwegian extraction leaned over his bed and congratulated him on surviving the twenty-to-one odds that medical statistics had stacked up against him.

Lew responded matter-of-factly, "Oh yeah? That's terrific doctor."

In retrospect, he said, his heart was not awash with gratitude, for until the doctor informed him, it never occurred to him that he might die. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

But here is what happened two nights later in Dr. Lewis Smedes own words, "In the moody hush that settles on a hospital room at two o'clock in the morning, alone, with no drugs inside of me to set me up for it—I was seized with a frenzy of gratitude. Possessed! My arms rose straight up by themselves, a hundred-pound weight could not have held them at my side. My hands open, my fingers spread, waving, twisting, while I blessed the Lord for the almost unbearable goodness of being alive on this good earth in this good body at this present time."

"I was flying outside of myself, high, held in weightless lightness, as if my earthly existence need no ground to rest in, but was hung in space with only love to keep it aloft."

"It was then I learned that gratitude is the best feeling I would ever have, the ultimate joy of living. It was better than sex, better than winning the lottery, better than watching your daughter graduate from college, better and deeper than any other feeling...I am sure that nothing in life can ever match the feeling of being held in being by a gracious energy percolating from the abyss where beats the loving heart of God."

This story gives personal testimony and color to what the apostle Paul tells us about the Holy Spirit, the indwelling presence and residence of God in our lives. "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:18-20).

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Paul is clearly stating that the presence of the Holy Spirit is an inner sensation. On the one hand, he compares the filling of the Holy Spirit to getting drunk with wine. Why do people drink? To get the buzz, the soothing sense of an inner warmth in the belly. Alcohol creates the momentary illusion of happiness. It is no accident that cocktails times in bars are called "happy hours." At Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit first came upon the believers who were waiting in an upstairs room, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. When the crowds heard the message of the gospel in their native tongues, the Scripture says, "Some made fun of them and said, 'they have had too much to drink' (Acts 2:13). To which Peter responded in defense, "Fellow Jews...listen carefully...These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning" (Acts 2:15).

The point is that being filled with the Spirit creates a sensation that looks a lot like someone who is drunk. But drink is only counterfeit joy. Alcohol anesthetizes our troubles. It masks problems by creating an artificial inducement of happiness. Alcohol may seem like an stimulant when, in fact, it is a depressant. The late Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones was both a physician and famous British pastor of a generation ago. Commenting on Paul's words he wrote, "Alcohol depresses first and foremost the highest centers of the brain...it controls everything that gives a person self-control, wisdom, understanding, discrimination, judgment, the power to assess everything; in other words, everything that makes people behave at their very best and highest."

I recently had the opportunity as a citizen to perform my civic responsibility by serving on a jury. As it turned out I was able to complete my service all in one day by being on a panel of six for a Cononer's Inquest. As we were instructed all unnatural deaths must come before a jury to determine the means of death. Unnatural deaths can be only one of three kinds: murder, suicide or accident. In the Coroner's court room they post a chart on the map of DuPage County of all the unnatural deaths over the previous year. Each death is represented by a colored circle for murder, suicide or accident. If the death involved alcohol, within the colored circle was a smaller white dot. What a graphic representation of the destructiveness of alcohol! Fully 50% of all unnatural deaths involved alcohol.

What was supposed to provide an inner glow and warmth in the belly, is a substance of destructive influence. Paul is saying, choose God's wine, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit from within provides the greatest sensation that a human can experience without all the destructive side effects. Jesus, speaking of the Holy Spirit, compares the Holy Spirit to a thirst quenching well spring that will gusher up like a geyser within our own being. *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of*

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*living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37, 38).* Other translations say that "out of his heart" or even better belly or kidneys shall flow rivers of living water." For the Hebrews the belly or the kidneys was the seat of innermost feelings or emotions. The emotional center was deep within our bowels.

Dallas Willard accurately captures both Jesus and Paul's focus on the feelings when he writes, "Holy delight and joy is the great antidote to despair (often the reason we drink) and is the wellspring of genuine gratitude—the kind that starts at our toes and blasts off from our loins and diaphragm through the top of our head, flinging our arms and our eyes and our voice upward toward our good God."

It, too, has been my experience that gratitude is the greatest rush that one can ever experience. There are times while standing next to my wife in worship, or privately during my own prayer time, that I will be recounting what a blessed person that I am to be a beloved child of God, to be able to minister to and be a part of this Christian community, to be madly in love with the same woman for 36 years, to have a daughter who is the pride of my life...then without warning I will be overwhelmed with this sensation that starts at the sole of my feet and wells up like Old Faithful. You want to know where the rivers of living water go...right out my eyes.

Isn't this exactly what Paul is saying that the filling of the Holy Spirit is? "Be filled", he says. Open yourself up, empty yourself of yourself, and make room for the Holy Spirit. How do you know when the Holy Spirit has filled you? Here is the evidence, Paul says: This is what the Holy Spirit produces in the life on individuals and the community that is open to the life of the Holy Spirit: 1. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." Eugene Peterson in *The Message* says simply, "Sing hymns instead of drinking songs." More about that later. 2. "Sing and make music to the Lord with all your heart."

Finally, 3. "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

1. The first sign of a spirit-filled community, is that we are full of joyful singing. It is a little confusing as what Paul means when he writes, "speak to or address one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." What does he mean by speak to or addressing one another? I am pretty sure that I know what he doesn't mean. Paul is not encouraging us to break out in operatic arias as our means of conversation.

Most likely he has a worship setting in mind, and this is an exhortation such as a call to worship, "Clap your hands, all people! Shout to God with loud songs of praise." Then he mentions three different kinds of singing. Let's not miss the irony here. There is room in the church for a variety of music. Let's get over any

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characterization that takes place between those who are devoted to classically music who are convinced that if you had any taste at all, this would be your only choice. Those who find the more contemporary sound are convinced that those who love classical must have expired a long time ago.

Paul says to sing *psalms*: The Psalm of the Old Testament were put to music and was the hymnbook for the people of God. Paul says make room for *hymns*: These are human compositions in the form of poetry that captures the rich theology of the church found in Scripture itself in sections like Philippians 2:6-11: "Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." Many biblical scholars believe that this was a hymn of the early church sung by the people of God, exalting Jesus Christ. Finally, Paul says sing psalms, hymns and *spiritual songs*. What are spiritual songs? Most likely Paul is speaking of spontaneous praise orchestrated by the Spirit of God Himself. You will not find this printed in the order of worship. This is the overflow of joy, being caught up by the Spirit in the moment, overtaking the tongues and hearts of the people. No human conductor puts this together.

2. Then Paul flows right into the second sign of the Holy Spirit's filling, that it is very much like the first. "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (v. 19) In a world that can be pretty dreary, what marks the people of God is joy. A young Ecuadorian girl by the name of Dayuma, escaped from a murderous tribe, and returned to it as a Christian. In her language her summary for the church was "God's singing house."

One of my favorite quotes about worship and music comes from the one credited with instigating the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther. Luther wrote, "I wish to see all arts, principally music, in the service of Him who gave and created them. Music is a fair and glorious gift of God. I would not for the world forgo my humble share of music. Singers are never sorrowful, but are merry, and smile through their troubles in song. Music makes people kinder, gentler, more staid and reasonable. I am strongly persuaded that after theology, there is no art that can be placed on the level of music; for beside theology, music is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of the heart...the devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God."

As an aside, now that I have mentioned Martin Luther and the Reformation, it might be interesting to know where some of the melodies came from for the

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hymns that date back to the Reformation. Some of the music is actually in the form of German bar tunes such as the great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Luther has been quoted as saying, "*Why should the devil have all the best music?*"

Why is music so important? Music is the language of the soul. Music by-passes our conscious defenses and grips our emotions. It takes us places that the written and spoken word cannot. Often during worship, I will look out during the singing of a particular hymn or chorus and see people wiping the moisture from their eyes. Something has caught us by surprise. It may touch a place of sadness and loss, but it also gives expression to gratitude like nothing else can.

3. Where does this joy through music come from? This leads us to the third evidence of the Holy Spirit's filling which is gratitude. "**Be filled with the Holy Spirit...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" Thanksgiving or gratitude is the motive for Christian living.

"Thank you" is what we say when we receive a gift. "Thank you so much" is what we say when we have received a great gift. Gratitude is simply a response to grace. Brennan Manning, a much beloved Christian communicator and former "leading lights" speaker here at Christ Church, tells the story of being approached by a man in his forties after he had finished a public speaking moment. The man handed Manning an envelope muttering softly, "*I've prayed about this.*" Manning had forgotten the envelope until it tumbled out of his pocket later that night as he was preparing for bed. It contained a check for \$6000. Prior to this speaking engagement, he had lived for a few days at a city garbage dump in Jaurez, Mexico. He observed children and old men and women scavenging food from a thirty foot mound of refuse. Several children died each week because of malnutrition and polluted water. He decided to send the \$6000 to a man with 10 children, three of whom had already died in those conditions. Do you know what the man did who received the check? He wrote Manning nine letters in two days—letters overflowing with gratitude describing in detail how he was using the money to help his family and others at the dump.

If we appreciate our poverty, we might wake each day with that kind of gratitude. I wonder about the lack of gratitude we seem to evidence in our comfortable western world, where our basic necessities and far more are taken care of, generally without much worry. Ingratitude in comfortable cultures, it seems to me, is rooted in a form of entitlement. The obvious attitude of entitlement is that I have it coming to me, I am owed what I have. But there is a subtler version of entitlement that robs us of gratitude, and that is the belief that we have, we have earned ourselves, through hard work, our ingenuity, the application of our abilities. What I have observed is that we take credit for what we have, and we blame God when adversity slips in to threaten what we have.

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In contrast to this I have followed, as many of you might have, the story of Judge Joan Lefkow, after the tragic murder of her husband and mother on February 28 of this year. The Tribune reporter, Mary Schmich, gave us an update on Sunday of *The Journey of Judge Joan Lefkow*. What came through the story to me was a woman of deep, quiet faith, whose life is rooted in a God of grace. How has she kept her sanity in the aftermath of this tragedy? In her words: *"I don't feel terribly entitled. I do believe the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. It is your responsibility to accept the adversity as well as you accept the abundance."* The story went on to speak of what Joan Lefkow calls the "little resurrections" that have been occurring over these last 9 months. She has been living off the glimmers of grace that have shown through even as she is working through a loss of untold proportions.

It is certainly against the background of realism, Paul writes, "always and for everything give thanks in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." Paul is essentially saying, *"Don't fool yourself. All is gift. Don't think for a moment that because of your privilege of birth, your inheritance of genes, your opportunities that give you an advantage that 99% of the world could not dream is possible, that what you have is your own doing."* James tells us that *"every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth..."* (James 1:17, 18)

The gift that serves as the greatest motivation for thanksgiving is that we have been given a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ, that is contrary to everything that we have earned. Who of us would ever have the audacity to say to the Lord, *"As a sign of your love for me, would you hang on a cross to pay the price of the guilt of my sin? And once you have done that would you wipe the slate of guilt clean by your forgiveness? Then would you please live in me, protect me, guide me, and bless me more that I can ever imagine?"*

No, we would never ask for what we have been given. That is why C. S. Lewis entitles his own autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. Grace is getting the opposite of what we deserve. What is the most well known Christian hymn? Hands down, it must be *Amazing Grace*. The author, John Newton, for many years before he became a Baptist pastor, was in his words *"once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa."* He was saved from the trading of human flesh to one who was bathed in the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

So out of gratitude he wrote,

*"Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now and found was blind but now I see."*

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"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear (he saw the horror of what he had become), and grace my fear relieved, how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed."

Will we ever get tired of standing in the sunshine of God's love?

"When we've been there ten thousands years, bright shining as the sun,  
we've no less days to sing God's praise, than when we've first begun."

The old Puritans, who we often think of as stoic and colorless believers, understood far better than we that gratitude was the greatest feeling in the world. One of their prayers goes like this,

Remember, O my Soul,

It is thy duty and privilege to rejoice in God:  
He requires it of thee for all his favors of grace.  
Rejoice then in the Giver and his goodness,  
Be happy in him, O my heart, and in nothing but God.  
He who is the ground of thy faith  
Should be the substance of thy joy.

Happy Thanksgiving!