

The Feeling at the Heart of the Christian Life  
Colossians 3:15-17

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This will be a simple message because it has just one point. It is about the one feeling that is at the heart of the everyday life of the Christian. The message can be summed up in that little sentence from Colossians 3:15, “And always be thankful,” or as *The Message* translates it, “Cultivate thanksgiving.” Two-and-a-half centuries ago William Law, the great devotional writer asked, “Who is the greatest saint?” It’s not, he said, the person who does the most, or even prays the most. It is the person who is most thankful.

This week the whole nation pauses to give at least a nod to the idea that there is someone to thank for all the good things we enjoy. But for a Christian, thanksgiving is not an event that comes around once a year. For a Christian every day is thanksgiving day. From Genesis to Revelation, the worship of God’s people is characterized by thanksgiving. We “enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise;” We “give thanks to him and bless his name” [Psalm 100:4]. We don’t do this because it is a duty or because some preacher has chastised us, saying “Be thankful!” We give thanks because our hearts are so full of the awareness of God’s grace and mercy that we cannot help but overflow in grateful praise. That fullness of our hearts that I am not ashamed to call a feeling is our most basic response to God. The new Christian’s first prayer, even before he can articulate it, is “Thank you! You did that for me?” This is what it really means to hear the gospel and to understand what grace is: to have welling up within us this awestruck awareness of what God has done for us. The medieval mystic Meister Eckhart said, “Even if the only prayer you can say is ‘thank you,’ it is enough.”

If the apostle Paul serves as a model for the Christian life, then it is clear that thanksgiving is as normal to the Christian as breathing. Paul’s letters are full of thanks, not just thanks to the people he is writing, but mainly thanks to God. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the little letter to the Colossians. If you flip through it you’ll see. In the third verse of the letter he starts out, “*we give thanks* to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Then in verses 11 and 12 he says, “May you be filled with joy, *always thanking* the Father, who has enabled you to share the inheritance that belongs to God’s holy people, who live in the light” (NLT here and through Colossians). Then skip to Colossians 2:7, where there is a wonderful verse describing the Christian life. “Let your roots grow down into [Christ] and draw up nourishment from him, so you will grow in faith, strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught. Let your lives *overflow with thanksgiving* for all he has done.” Near the end of the letter Paul says in 4:2, “Be persistent in prayer, and keep alert as you pray, *giving thanks* to God.”

In the middle of this comes the familiar paragraph on life in the church found in Colossians 3:15-17, where we hear the note of thanksgiving struck three times. Listen: “And *always be thankful*. Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God *with thankful hearts*. And whatever you do or say, let it

be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, *all the while giving thanks* through him to God the Father.” Paul has been talking about the love and peace that are to characterize the church as the body of Christ. What draws the body together is worship. And the one thing that most characterizes Christian worship is thanksgiving.

Why would anyone *not* feel thankful to God and express it? It seems to be an instinct built into us. I heard of a well-known atheist who looked out on a beautiful scene and exclaimed, “Oh, it just makes me feel so grateful!” Her believing friend asked, “Grateful to whom, my dear?” Thanksgiving Day is not, after all, about being thankful to the Native Americans or to Mother Nature or to Grandma or the turkey. The point of this national holiday is to give thanks to God, however we understand God. We may disagree about whether it is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to whom we give thanks, but every culture I’ve ever heard of had a sense that there was someone to thank—except for what we call modern secular culture. Katherine Mansfield, a great short story writer from the beginning of the twentieth century was a free-thinker, an early feminist, and an atheist. She wrote in a letter about standing in a lovely spot in the Alps: “If only one could make some small grasshoppery sound of praise to someone, of thanks to someone, but to who?”

If you don’t feel thankful, you just aren’t paying attention. That’s the problem for some of us, I think: not that we are entirely self-centered or feel completely self-sufficient, but we never stop to look around us and, as the old song says, count our blessings. We are focused on the tasks we have to do or the pains we have to endure, but the minute we look around—and especially if we look around at Block Island—our hearts are filled with gratitude.

Mary Oliver, the poet from Provincetown, has been teaching Americans to pay attention for decades, and she has moved over the years from a kind of generic nature-thankfulness to Christian gratitude to God. Here’s a little poem she wrote called “Praying:”

“It doesn’t have to be/ the blue iris, it could be/ weeds in a vacant lot, or a few/ small stones; just/ pay attention, then patch/ a few words together and don’t try/ to make them elaborate, this isn’t/ a contest but the doorway/ into thanks, and a silence in which/ another voice may speak.” In another poem she talks about an experience of sitting in the grass and having two deer walk right up to her and nuzzle her hand. She asks “What can my life/ bring me that could exceed/ that brief moment?/ For twenty years/ I have gone every day to the same woods,/ not waiting, exactly, just lingering./ Such gifts, bestowed/ can’t be repeated./ If you want to talk about this/ come to visit. I live in the house/ near the corner, which I have named/ Gratitude.”

This is at the heart of the Christian life: the shift from seeing what we have as simply *there*, or even as something we *deserve*, to seeing everything as *gift*. Because we believe that God created the heavens and the earth, the world itself is a gift to us. Because God breathed life into us, life itself is gift, and because God created every person in God’s own image, every person is a gift to us. Every dollar we have, every bite we eat, every drink we take—they are all gifts from the God who loves us, and they cause us to want to say ‘thank you.’ But when Paul blurts out at the end of his stewardship appeal in 2 Corinthians 9, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” he has one thing in mind: the gift of Jesus the Messiah dying for us on the cross. Becoming a Christian means nothing other than becoming thankful for what God has done for us in Jesus.

I remember walking into a hospital room to see Virginia, an older African-American member of my church in New Jersey. Virginia was a retired nurse who had become diabetic and lost a leg, and now her heart was giving her trouble. But when I asked her how she was doing, the first words out of her mouth were, “I’m grateful, pastor. I’m grateful.”

I remember Bob, another wheelchair-bound member of my church, who had suffered from cerebral palsy since childhood but had now reached the age of 70, outliving his mother who had cared for him. Bob had difficulty moving or speaking or feeding himself, but whenever I would greet Bob on Sunday morning, he would struggle to grasp my hand, then give me a big grin, and say, “I’m just so thankful to be here!” Gerald Peterson is another man with cerebral palsy, a Canadian Baptist in Edmonton, who lives in a wheelchair, totally dependent on others for his physical well-being. He cannot speak, but he communicates by means of a word board and a typewriter he operates with a wand attached to his head. Gerald wrote an essay “On Being Thankful” which was published in the *Canadian Baptist* magazine:

“Those who are blessed with a healthy body should be thankful for the wonderful coordination of mind and body which makes it possible for us to care for ourselves – feed ourselves – bathe ourselves – play musical instruments and games.

“We should be thankful for even the simple things that we take so much for granted – like getting undressed by ourselves – getting into bed without help – putting on our own glasses – being able to brush our own hair and teeth – getting a glass of water from the tap, or being able to draw or write.

“Being able to walk is a blessing – and we should be thankful if we can walk and go wherever we wish – to climb a mountain trail, walk along a beach, or just go to a friend’s house.

“We should be thankful for the wonderful gift of speech – and to be able to communicate with others, or to join in song.

“Because of my particular circumstances, I am grateful that others do all these things for me – and that God has given me sight and hearing. I can watch the lovely sunsets – see the mountains – hear the birds sing – and I am so very thankful to God for this.

“I suppose what I am trying to say is that we should be thankful for what we are, and for everything we have. I am thankful for this every day, and for life itself.”

A pastor in Toronto told how a friend of his prayed when he discovered he had cancer: “God, I’m not thankful for this disease. I’m not thankful for the things that have brought it upon me. But I am thankful that when I wake up tomorrow, you will still be with me, your love will still surround me, and in your love, I can carry on another day. And I’m thankful that when the day comes that I don’t wake up, you will still be there with me, your love will still surround me, and in your love, I will carry on forever”

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