

Gripping or Gratitude?
Philippians 4:1-9
November 22, 2020

In his book on the practice of gratitude, the former dean of Grace Cathedral, Alan Jones, tells about a man named George. George has been through his share of trials in life, including prostate cancer and the death of his wife. His friends are puzzled by his genuine cheerfulness and upbeat spirit. When asked to share his secret, George says there are basically only three responses to life: “Damn! Help! and Thank you!” He’s tried them all. The first one he described as “like pouring all your energy down a rat hole.” The second, “Help!” was appropriate more often than he would like. But it was the third, “Thank you!” that produced the most mileage. “I faced a lot of stuff in my life, including death, and I decided I might as well live, and live as gratefully as I could. Every day is a gift and I don’t want to waste it in either cynicism or self-pity.”

George describes a ritual part of his daily life. “I am struck by the simple fact that my day goes better when I begin it by pausing for a moment to let myself feel astonished. I wonder that there is a day at all, that there is a me to live it. I am amazed that there is anything at all, that there is a me at all—even a depressed and faithless me. And if I’m lucky, this sense of amazement is sustained by gratitude.”ⁱ

Paul, the author of the letter to the church at Philippi, was no stranger to difficult circumstances. He was writing from prison, incarcerated for spreading the good news of God’s love expressed in the life of Jesus Christ. Ironically, the very gospel of grace that was meant to free people from bondage to sin put Paul in chains. Beaten, persecuted, and shipwrecked for his faith in Christ, still he rejoiced in the Lord always.

We might learn something from George and Paul for the living of these days in which we feel somewhat imprisoned. We’re confined by stay-at-home orders, even impending curfews. Small businesses, restaurants, the tourism industry and so much more are on the verge of collapse. Millions are grieving the loss of loved ones while thousands struggle with the long-term impact of Covid-19 on their health. Most of us are downsizing holiday celebrations and will feel the absence of being with loved ones during this season. This mix of ingredients threatens to make us angry, terrified, and depressed.

George focused on gratitude. Paul writes of rejoicing in God, praying to God with thanksgiving, and training our thoughts. Scientific research has proven the power of gratitude to increase happiness and life satisfaction. If there was a label on a box of gratitude it would list the potential benefits as: boosts feelings of joy, pleasure, and enthusiasm; reduces anxiety and depression; strengthens the immune system, lowers blood pressure, reduces symptoms of illness; promotes more hours of sleep each night to feel more refreshed upon awakening; builds resiliency.

There’s more: Gratitude strengthens relationships, increases satisfaction, promotes forgiveness, inspires altruism and compassion.ⁱⁱ

All of these positive impacts of gratitude are free. No expensive medication, high tech medical tests, or authorization from your insurance provider required. Gratitude is a remedy readily available to anyone at no cost. It simply needs to be practiced. This in no way discounts the value of and need for medical treatment and therapy. It merely affirms that gratitude is a powerful means of improving the quality of our lives.

Sir John Templeton asked the question, “How can we get six billion people around the world to practice gratitude?” That may be the antidote our world needs to rid us of the violence and hatred that is destroying so many lives.

Shortly after Templeton died in 2008, a family member discovered a letter he had sent with his family Christmas card in 1962. Templeton invited his readers to think of their minds as a garden and themselves as gardeners responsible for tending it. He said, “If you exercise no control, it will become a weed patch and a source of shame and misery. If you exercise wise control, then [your mind] will be filled with God’s miracles and become a place of indescribable beauty. You are free to choose which.”

He suggests developing the habit of looking at each thought as you would a plant. If it is worthy, if it fits the plan you desire for your mind, cultivate it. If not, replace it. How do you get it out of your mind? Simply by putting in its place two or three thoughts of love, gratitude, or worship, for no mind can dwell on more than two or three thoughts at one time.ⁱⁱⁱ Pluck out the weeds, those negative thoughts that contaminate our minds, and plant positive thoughts.

There are some tools to help us cultivate a garden of gratitude. One practice is a gratitude walk. Before you begin, set an intention to be grateful. For a 10 or 20 minute walk, with every step compose an expression of gratitude. It may begin with our physical bodies: “I am thankful for my eyes that allow me to see. I am thankful for my ears that allow me to hear. I am thankful for my feet.” You might include things that you see: “I am thankful for my car. I am thankful for my neighbor. I am thankful for the rain.”

Another practice is the ABC’s of Grateful Living. Go through the alphabet and for each letter, note the first word that comes to mind. Make a connection between that word and your practice of grateful living. A Attention – when I pay attention to the present moment, I am more mindful of the small and large blessings of each moment. B Beauty – I’m amazed at the beauty of the energetic hummingbirds who feast on blossoms and feeders in my yard. C – Chocolate – Fair Trade dark chocolate makes more than one person grateful – all involved in the production and the consumer. Moving through the alphabet keeps me focused.

These practices make me more mindful of the blessings of life. Instead of letting my mind wander and cultivate a field of weeds, these practices plant positive thoughts in my mind. I’m more aware of things that I tend to take for granted. And I see how God is moving through my life, showering it with blessings of relationships, experiences, beauty, and more.

As George said, there are three basic responses in life: Darn! Help! and Thank You! Frustration is natural, but it doesn’t get us very far. There are times when we all need a bit of help and it is good to ask. George found that he gets more mileage out of “Thank you.” Even in the face of all that threatens to undo us, may we have eyes, ears, and hearts to claim the blessings of God in our midst, and respond, “Thank you, God.”

ⁱ Alan Jones and John O’Neil, *Seasons of Grace: The Life-Giving Practice of Gratitude* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003), p. 4.

ⁱⁱ Robert Emmons, “Why Practice Gratitude,” November 16, 2010, http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good, retrieved December 28, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert A. Emmons, *Gratitude Works! A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2013), pp. 8-9.