

SESSION 1

Gratitude: Ephesians 1.3-14



GRATITUDE

Piglet noticed that even though he had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude.

*from Winnie-the-Pooh
by A A Milne*

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If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough.

*Meister Eckhart,
German mystic c. 1260-1328*

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Some people grumble that roses have thorns; I am grateful that thorns have roses.

*from A Tour Round My
Garden by Alphonse Karr*

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Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.

*Cicero, Roman philosopher
(106-43BC)*

When one of my daughters was very small, I – as so many other parents up and down the country have done – was trying to teach her to say her ‘pleases and thank yous’. She wanted a crisp. ‘So what do you say?’ I enquired. ‘Peese,’ she lisped. So far, so good. I gave it to her. ‘And now what do you say?’ She looked at me with that determined stare of a toddler. ‘More.’ Not quite the outcome I had desired!

This raises the question of why we so determinedly teach our children to say please and thank you. On the surface the answer is very straightforward: we want them to say please and thank you in order to be polite. But maybe there is another, deeper answer as well.

There is a connection between *saying* thank you and *being* grateful. As we all know, just saying the polite thing is unacceptable if it is clear the other person doesn’t really mean it. Any parent trying to teach their children to say sorry has learnt this the hard way. Wringing a ‘sorry’ out of them, when they clearly do not mean it, is disappointing in the extreme. So when I taught my children to say ‘thank you’, I hoped and prayed that through learning to say ‘thank you’, they might also learn to feel it too.

A tumble of words

Living a life filled with gratitude is one of the markers of our Christian faith. The words of Ephesians 1.3-14 reflect a glorious example of someone who feels profoundly grateful. Gratitude simply flows out of them, word after word, phrase upon phrase, of wondering, overwhelming praise.

Ephesians 1.3-14 is one of a number of hymn or poetry-like passages in the New Testament. Perhaps they were first written as hymns or poems by the earliest Christians and later found their way into the New Testament. Or maybe these poems were composed by the New Testament letter-writers themselves. Either way, each of the passages we will be looking at throughout this course contains the most sublime poetry about Christ: who he was, and is.

The first thing to notice about this ‘song’ is the way the words of praise tumble out of the author. In Greek (the language of the New Testament) verses 3-14 are just one single sentence – all flowing from the first phrase:

God gave you a gift of 86,400 seconds today. Have you used one to say thank you?

*William Arthur Ward,
American writer*

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As I have come to realize God’s love not only for humanity in general but for me in particular, it has filled me with feelings of gratitude and worship.

*Prof. Sir John Houghton,
physicist*

[My life is] distressing, deadly dangerous ... and worthy of being accepted and lived in glad and grateful obedience to God.

*Boris Pasternak, Russian
Nobel Prize-winner*

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Ephesians falls over itself in a breathless paean of praise about every blessing, being chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, being redeemed, chosen for adoption as children, experiencing God’s good pleasure in Christ, and more, and more ...

Revd Canon Rosalind Brown

In my powerlessness, suffering and captivity there remained to me one freedom: I could abandon myself into the hands of God ... In suffering we can spend our energy in bitterness and despair battering our wings against the cage, or we can come alongside God in prayer and take up our cross.

*Dr Sheila Cassidy (who was
tortured in Chile)*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places ...

It is almost as though the author is overwhelmed by the wonder of what he is saying. The words just spill out without any pause for breath at all. Everything in this passage is based on this first phrase: God has blessed us; so we must bless him. God has poured out glorious good things on us in Christ; the only possible response to this is ... PRAISE!

Half empty; half full?

We often talk about optimism and pessimism as though they are personality traits, and to a certain extent they are. Some people seem to find it much easier than others to look on the bright side of life. Some people’s glasses are most definitely half full; whereas others seem only to see theirs as half empty. Passages like this, however, remind us that while optimism might be a personality trait, gratitude is not.

Gratitude is, if you like, a spiritual discipline. Passages like this one in Ephesians 1 remind us of the importance of rehearsing all the good things that God has done for us. It might take the form of this complex poetic passage, or it might take a much simpler form – simply spending time each day remembering what God has done for you. Gratitude is something that we can learn to do. This is what I meant when I called it a ‘spiritual discipline’.

Sleeping with bread

One of the books about prayer that has had the greatest impact on me is a simple, small book called *Sleeping with Bread* (by Dennis Linn et al, 1994). It opens by telling the story of the people who worked with child survivors of the concentration camps after the Second World War. To begin with, the children were so traumatized by what had happened to them that they struggled to sleep. Until, by chance, one worker made a discovery. If the children went to bed holding a piece of bread, they could sleep – knowing that come the morning, they could be sure of having something to eat.