

Psalms 138: A Life of Gratitude

Psalms: God's Word For Life

A couple of weeks ago we began this series of messages on "Psalms for Living." It's not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of the Psalms, but a few of the psalms and how they guide our faith.

There are 150 Psalms in the Bible; some long, some short. They are songs or poems written at various times by God's people, the Israelites. They are not just the products of pious individuals in ancient Israel, but represent the hymnbook or prayer book of Israelite worship. At the same time each psalm is a unique poetic creation.

There are psalms of individuals and psalms of the faithful community. Some are laments and some are songs of thanksgiving. There are hymns of praise and royal psalms that speak of the kingship of David and his heirs. There are wisdom psalms similar to wisdom found in proverbs. The psalms were created, preserved and transmitted not only as record of human response to God, but also as God's word to humanity. Though rooted in historical circumstance, each psalm contains a word from God to believers of succeeding generations. A life rooted in the eternal Word of God will be blessed, withstand adversity and bear good fruit. Today let's look at Psalm 138 and see how becoming better will mean developing an "attitude of gratitude."

Two Kinds of People

It's been said that the world can be divided into two groups, those who say, "Thank You" and those who don't; those who are truly grateful and those who aren't. I read of the elderly New England clergyman who touched upon the various degrees of gratitude in his prayer: "O Lord, as you know very well, here we are again. We are here to do one of the hardest things any mortal can do--to give thanks and really mean it."¹

How do you say "thank you" and really mean it? What does it mean to be grateful? Why is it important and ... so hard?

You may or may not agree with me, but my observation is that we live in a time and place that exalts the "I deserve" concept or the "me first" syndrome or the "have it my way" lifestyle. Thankfulness and praise to God kind of get lost in the "me-centered" attitudes that pervade our society. I see it in numerous ways: if you've had teen-agers in your home for any length of time you know what I'm talking about. Church people often think that if they give to those in need – food,

¹from a sermon by Eric S. Ritz

shelter, opportunity, money – that they will be thanked in return, and are disappointed when it so rarely happens. Just remember Jesus' healing of ten lepers (Luke 17:14): *“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus feet and thanked him... Jesus asked, ‘Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?’”* ... So, look for the ten percent...

Unnatural Thankfulness

Gratitude, thankfulness does not come naturally to us – that's because humans are sinful in their fallen nature. Gratitude must be cultivated. The best place to learn to be thankful is in the home where thankful expressions are given voice. In church we should always be ready to thank God for our blessings, in all seasons of life. Our souls need constant reminders to be thankful because it does not come naturally to us. When cultivated, an “attitude of gratitude” brings us the blessings that God intends for our lives. Gracious living flows from living with gratitude.

Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.”

Without thankfulness, without an “attitude of gratitude,” real community is hard to come by. When we are simply a collection of individuals, seeking our own desires, forgetting or ignoring what others have done for us, including God, then we will hardly be able to live together with harmony let alone with joy. A couple of years ago, at our preschool “graduation” in the sanctuary, one parent came and asked if we could ask the folks in front of her if they could lower their balloons and signs so she could see. Our preschool director graciously asked the balloon-toting folks to do so and the reply she got was a grumpy, “Well, if I have to.” That is not an attitude that bodes well for our future together in this city or nation.

Psalms 138 is a song of thanksgiving that teaches us the value of gratitude. It is thought by some Bible scholars to have been written by David upon his being advanced to the throne; on account of which he praises the Lord, who had supported him through many trials.² Others believe, following as it does Psalm 137, that Psalm 138 is an expression of thanksgiving of those Israelites who returned to Jerusalem after captivity in Babylon. After their distress (including the journey home) they bowed down toward the place of the holy temple and thanked God. And perhaps this points to what seems a consistent pattern: we tend to become more grateful after we've been through trials and deprivation.

²John Gill's *Exposition of the Bible*

Upon my return from Tonga, two weeks ago, I was grateful for the simple pleasures of a warm shower and a cold drink.

“I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart,” the psalm begins. “With my whole heart” is like saying, “I’m bringing my whole self, or my whole life, to thank you God.” That’s what it means to say thanks and mean it. I recall asking the lay leader at a previous congregation why the people didn’t sing with more enthusiasm. His answer: only those who know they are sinners and know they’ve been forgiven can sing God’s praises with enthusiasm.

Psalm 138 illustrates for us what it is to not be afraid to acknowledge our Source of blessing. It says: “before the gods I will sing your praise.” A more literal translation makes this phrase understandable by our contemporary idiom, “in your face.” The psalmist offers praise to God right in the face of other gods, contemptuously denying them any authority. This psalm (for those who sang it and those who sing it today) clearly proclaims that God alone is sovereign and God alone provides. Those who are proud in their self-sufficiency have trouble doing this; “The Lord is on high” and “the proud he knows from afar.”

Foundation of Christian Living

St. Paul writes: *... as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many* 2 Corinthians 1:11. Thanksgiving is one of the building blocks of Christian living and one that is easy to overlook. I know because I often forget to be thankful. I was one of those who could always identify what was wrong with a situation or a person and be unhappy about it. That’s why I decided to make a habit of always starting my prayers with thanksgiving – and it’s changed my outlook on life. Gratitude has its root in acknowledging the Source of life and all we have. The virtues of gratitude, humility, patience, and self-sacrifice, are extolled in Scripture as a model for living in faithfulness to God. What kind of people are we becoming at First Church? Is not our aim to become more spiritually mature; more like Jesus Christ?

The testimony lived out by countless saints over the centuries tells us that living by these virtues builds Christ-like character and makes us more open to God’s direction. These virtues have been part of Christian living for 2,000 years, for they give direction for life, illuminate our purpose in living, and foster true, God-given community. Conscious choice to live by these virtues is what makes possible God’s working in our lives. Truly giving thanks to God, and then to others, is a time-tested discipline. What kind of person are you becoming?

In an interview country music singer and song-writer Aaron Watson tells of his upbringing and how he learned gratitude from his father. As a teenager his dad required him to lend a hand at work on a summer day when the boy wanted to join his friends swimming. His dad was a janitor and that day was cleaning a church in town. As they both scrubbed toilets Aaron says he kept complaining

to his dad how much he hated cleaning toilets and giving up his day to clean other people's messes. His dad stopped scrubbing and quietly said to him: "You know, my life didn't turn out the way I had planned ... I never intended to grow up to be a janitor. But sometimes things happen in life. I'm just grateful to God for what I have. I'm grateful that I have this job so I can provide for my wife and family. So, my gratitude is shown to God by making sure this is the cleanest church in town."

It seems so much easier to see where we're not satisfied than to see where God has blessed us. According to Robert A. Emmons, PhD., professor of psychology at U.C. Davis, we would be better off if we counted our blessings more often. In a 2003 study of nearly 200 people, Emmons found that those who kept a gratitude journal experienced more optimism and had healthier habits than those who recorded struggles or neutral life events.

It's not hard to weave thankfulness into your life. You could do it while you brush your teeth or cook a meal. Listing what you're grateful for deepens your awareness of life's blessings and also helps articulate your gratitude toward others. To thank someone with meaning is a bonding type experience. Expressing and receiving gratitude is essential to strengthening relationships.

Building stronger bonds isn't the only benefit to becoming more grateful. Cultivating a greater sense of gratitude lifts your mood, even when you're going through the most challenging time. A grateful heart is like a magnet, attracting more abundance, support, and things to be grateful for. The unthankful heart... discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day and, as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find, in every hour, some heavenly blessings!³

A grateful heart has more room for God's grace, so it can receive more blessings. Grace isn't a little prayer you say before meals. It's a way of life.

Like so many other lessons from the Bible the message here is about trusting God. And maybe that's why being thankful is so hard. We want to trust ourselves alone and expect all to work out to our personal satisfaction. The closing of Psalm 138 reminds us of that song "he's got the whole world in his hands." God has the whole world and all people in his care. God rules. In the midst of all kinds of trouble or opposition we can affirm that God preserves life. God intends to fulfill His purpose in our lives. God's love endures forever.

It seems like we find ourselves professing God's deliverance – giving thanks for God's blessings – and at the same time asking for deliverance. That's because our experience of God's grace does not alter our neediness – that's just life and faith in God. Depending on God in tough circumstances, depending on God for life direction, depending on God for the future, rather than gods of our own making or just ourselves; that is what really makes it possible to live today with confidence. That's what makes it possible for us to offer our lives to God.

³Henry Ward Beecher

**Jesus taught us the same in the prayer He gave us: “Thy kingdom come” ...
“Thine is the kingdom.”**

The discipline of thanksgiving is essential to living as a Christian, because it makes us thankful people. And *that* will make us more nearly like Christ.

***Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever,*
1 Chronicles 16:34.**