

# Cultivating a Grateful Heart

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## Acts 14:15-17 (KJV)

<sup>15</sup> And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein:

<sup>16</sup> Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.

<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.

## Acts 14:15-17 (MSG)

<sup>15</sup> "What do you think you're doing! We're not gods! We are men just like you, and we're here to bring you the Message, to persuade you to abandon these silly god-superstitions and embrace God himself, the living God. We don't make God; he makes us, and all of this—sky, earth, sea, and everything in them.

<sup>16</sup> "In the generations before us, God let all the different nations go their own way.

<sup>17</sup> But even then he didn't leave them without a clue, for he made a good creation, poured down rain and gave bumper crops. When your bellies were full and your hearts happy, there was evidence of good beyond your doing."



One of the great mysteries of our culture is that we are the most privileged and prosperous people who have ever lived on the face of the earth — past and present — and yet many Americans are not happy. We have more of everything, and yet we are not content. Even when good things happen we figure out why it was not good enough. Gregg Easterbrook recently wrote a book entitled: *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. Chuck Colson reports that, "Life expectancy has nearly doubled in the past century and continues to increase. The average real per-capita income has doubled just since 1960. Along with a rise in income is the good news that the price of food and many durable goods keeps falling. Our standard of living has risen to levels our great-grandparents couldn't have imagined. For most of our history, the average home had one room for every two people; today there are two rooms for every one person. By any measure of affluence — health care, leisure, technology — the average American enjoys a quality of life beyond anyone's wildest dreams even a few decades ago. **We have more of everything except, of course, happiness.** The percentage of Americans who would call themselves as 'happy' hasn't changed since the 1950s, but the percentage of those describing themselves as 'very happy' is down and continues to decline. During the same period, the percentage of Americans and Europeans who suffer

a bout of depression has climbed to 25 percent and shows no signs of abating. **An estimated 7 percent of all Americans suffer at least one incidence of major, debilitating depression a year.”**

Somehow we have lost the sense of wonder about life. We have stopped seeing how simple, how good and wonderful life can be. We can't just blame the news for seeing all the things that are wrong with the world. Easterbrook tells us that the Roman orator Cicero called gratitude not only the “greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.” The philosopher Immanuel Kant called ingratitude the “essence of vileness.” **But many people are facing life with a daily sense of dread rather than a daily sense of thanksgiving.**

The perfect example of this was the Oprah Winfrey show that aired last September (2004). Oprah, whose show now airs in 109 countries around the world, celebrated her 19th season by giving away new cars to every person in her audience that day. The 276 audience members were selected because friends or family had written about their need for a new car. One couple had 400,000 miles on their two vehicles, and one mom wrote in that her son drove a car that looked like it had been in a gunfight. Oprah began by calling 11 people out of the audience onto the stage. She gave each of them a brand new Pontiac G6. Then she distributed a gift box to everyone in the audience, telling them that one of them contained the keys to a 12th new car. But when the audience opened the boxes, each one had a set of keys. Oprah jumped up and down and yelled: “Everybody gets a car! Everybody gets a car! Everybody gets a car!” There was pandemonium as everyone yelled and hugged each other. Then they went to the parking lot of Oprah's Harpo Studios to see their cars, all decorated with giant red bows.

But not all is well in Oprah land. Now the people who received the new cars are complaining. Even though the local taxes and licensing fees were covered as a part of the gift, the IRS is going to take a sizable bite out of their pocket, because the \$28,000, which is the value of the car, will be added to their income for this year. Their state income tax will also go up. And their car insurance will increase dramatically. Some of the winners thought that all this should have been taken into account and they should have been given the cash to cover these expenses as well. Richard Whately said it well when he wrote in the 1800's: **“It is generally true that all that is required to make men unmindful of what they owe God for any blessing is that they should receive that blessing often and regularly.”**

How do I keep from living out the progress paradox — becoming ungrateful and hardened to the increasing blessings I have in life? What I need is a change of focus. **The first change of focus I need is: I need to change my focus from what I don't have to what I do have.** The problem of living in our culture is the extreme commercialization of everything. It used to be that people did not even recognize much of the poverty they lived in, because everyone was the same. They looked around them and no one was significantly better off than they were. My parents used to talk about this when they grew up during the Great Depression. They didn't realize they were poor, because everyone lived like they did. But now we have television showing us beautiful cars, clothes,

electronic gadgets, new homes, new tools, new appliances, etc. We have malls crammed with the latest of everything. The mail is filled with ads and catalogs. Even our bills come with advertisements disguised as “offers.” Game shows give away millions of dollars everyday in cash and prizes. People we know are able to afford things that we wish we could have. American businesses do not want us to be content, and they work very hard to make sure we are not.

Somehow we have lost touch with the Scripture that says: **“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5).** When you have God, you have it all. Greed is simply the desire to always have more. Greed is never satisfied. It is a treadmill that never lets you off. Paul warned Timothy, **“People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:9-10).** Greed kills gratitude. It also kills our spiritual sensibilities, and dulls our appetite for the things of God. It can, as Paul said, actually lead us away from God, and because of that, many sorrows find their way into our lives. I have witnessed this in the lives of many people who were at one time sincere in their love for God and their desire to live the Christian life, but somehow the desire to gain wealth began to take over their lives and they eventually vanished from the spiritual world. Paul wisely said, **“But godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).** In fact, I would say that godliness cannot exist without contentment. Greed is the opposite of contentment. It is the refusal to be satisfied. It is always focused on what you don’t have rather than the blessings you do have.

**The second change of focus** I need if I am going to cultivate a grateful heart is: **I need to change my focus from getting a blessing, to being a blessing.** It is not about you. Some people come into the Christian life thinking that they are going to get something out of it, some benefit. They come to God so that he might serve them, instead of the desire to serve God. You do not come to Christ to get a blessing, but to become a blessing. We need to move from getting to giving. Giving our wealth, resources, time and energy should become a blessing to us. The paradox is not only that the more we have the less grateful we become, but the more we have the more we want to keep everything we have to ourselves. Someone who has nothing does not mind giving something away so much, because they are used to not having anything and doing without. We see this reality in the countries which are in poverty like Honduras and Haiti. The people there can be amazingly generous. But the more a person has, the more they want to keep. They are not used to doing without anything. I am often staggered by sports and media stars who are getting paid millions of dollars, but who go on strike for millions more. They can’t possibly spend it all, but they still want more. Of course, I am sure my life would look the same way to a person in Haiti or Honduras. They could not possibly understand why I want more things when I already have so much, and the things I want are things which I really do not need.

We need to move from getting all the blessings we can to being a blessing. If you had all the money a person could spend, it would not bring purpose and meaning into your life. In order for there to be meaning and direction in your life, your life needs to be used by God. Only when you invest your life in the lives of other people do you find purpose. There is no fulfillment in self-centered living. We find life by giving ours away. Jesus put it like this: **“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39)**. Give your life to God and live for others, and life will be returned to you a hundred fold. Keep your life to yourself, and your life will shrink to nothing and die.

Jesus told us the path to fulfillment when he said, **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45)**. Jesus was the perfect example of someone who could have demanded to be served, and chose to serve others instead. He understood that it was the path to joy. Serving others gets our minds off ourselves. Feeling sorry for yourself? Go visit people in the nursing homes and hospitals. Volunteer at the Church or Community Center. It won't be long until you find yourself being very grateful for how God has blessed you.

After Jesus healed the man who had been possessed by a demon, the healed man wanted to follow Jesus and be with him. But Jesus told the man to go back to his village and tell his friends all the things God had done for him. He just wanted to spend time with Jesus, but Jesus knew that his healing would be incomplete without being of service to God and the kingdom. His healing would find completion as he ministered to others — and he would never grow unless he did. Jesus always tried to get people to change their focus from themselves to the needs around them. **Until your life is being used by God in some form of ministry and service to others, you will not experience real joy**. The Bible tells us: **“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24)**. Jesus said, **“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40)**.

**The third change of focus** I need if I am going to cultivate a grateful heart is: **I need to change my focus from earth to eternity**. Life is good, but life can also be very difficult here. Problems arise. Losses and setbacks occur. Disaster strikes. And if this world was all we have, then we might have reason to despair. But Paul reminds us: **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Corinthians 15:19)**. We serve a God who has overcome the world and a Savior who is preparing a place for us in his glory. We have a future and a hope.

The writer of Hebrews talks about the great heroes of the faith who endured enormous suffering in the world because of their faithfulness. This world was not good to them, and many of their needs and hopes remained unfulfilled in this world. But he writes: **“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things**

**promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. . . Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13,16).** Paul, who experienced countless beatings and imprisonments, reminded us in **2 Corinthians**: **“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. . . Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:8, 16-18).**

This is why the Bible can say, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things” (Philippians 4:6-8).** When we have the hope of eternity in our hearts, we understand why the Bible says to: **“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 5:19-20).** And again: **“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit’s fire” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-19).**

Don’t you think it is about time that we woke up to the joy of God? Don’t you think we should be living out the joy God has built into life? The Bible says that the fruit of the Spirit is joy. Unless we are dealing with a major life problem or loss, if we are not living out joy, doesn’t that mean that we have a spiritual problem? You know, if you let go and allow yourself to experience joy, it does not mean that something bad is going to happen. Worry does not keep trouble away, in fact, it creates trouble. If you are a Christian you should not be cultivating a sour spirit. It is a dispositional sin against God who has created a good world. It is a lack of faith in the fact that God is good and has given us a good world in which to live.

Mother Theresa tells the story of ministering to an old woman dying from starvation: “One evening we went out, and we picked up four people from the street. And one of them was in a most terrible condition. I told the sisters, ‘You take care of the other three; I will take care of the one who looks worst.’ So I did for her all that my love could do. I put her in bed, and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand as she said two words only: ‘Thank you.’ Then she died. I could not help but examine my conscience before her. And I asked: ‘What would I say if I were in her place?’ And my answer was very simple. I would have tried to draw a little attention to myself. I would have said, ‘I am hungry, I am dying, I am in pain,’ or something. But she

gave me much more; she gave me her grateful love. And she died with a smile on her face. That is the way I want to die, regardless of my circumstances — not with whining and whimpering, not with complaining and bitterness of spirit, but with gratitude on my lips. If I am able to do this, it will bring a smile not only to my face, but to the face of God.