

The Pre-existing Conditions of Thankfulness

I Chrn. 16:34

Intro. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever! Among the distinct and most attractive qualities that identify those who belong to Christ is a spirit of thankfulness. Because God is good all the time, our thankfulness should be perpetual. **Col. 2:6** says, "**So then, just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.**" Notice that thankfulness should **overflow** from our lives. This overflow is the effect of being rooted and built up in Christ. Like an artesian spring, Paul here describes a life strengthened in faith...a life that continuously responds to God's goodness with grateful praise.

Thanksgiving is my all time favorite holiday! As Ruby Hammond used to say, "Pastor, I hope you had a big time last week." And we did. But thanksgiving ought to be habitual for every child of God. Our Heavenly Father deserves to be thanked everyday and throughout our days!

Yet thankfulness isn't an isolated virtue, nor is it automatic. Thankfulness has some close associates. There are several pre-existing conditions that contribute to thankfulness and like other Christian virtues, being thankful requires some intentional effort. I developed an acrostic from the spelling of the word, **thanks** based on some things the Bible says about this virtue.

T - Thoughtfulness - One peril of our times is a lack of thoughtfulness. Few find time to meditate and seriously consider the things of God. We tend to be so preoccupied by the concerns of today and tomorrow that we often fail to reflect on things God did for us yesterday. Time for reflection is often gobbled up by a book, TV or an I-pad. Life in the fast lane precludes obedience to God's command to **..."Be still and know that I am God."** Yet being still before God is an essential discipline for us! How can we love the Lord with all our being if we don't invest time reflecting on who God is / what He has said to us / and what He has done for us? William Wordsworth recognized our need for solitude. He wrote, "*Rest and be thankful.*" Every child of God needs quiet time and there are no exceptions.

Samuel was a faithful prophet in his generation. He was deeply disappointed when Israel refused his counsel and demanded a king. He acquiesced to their demand but cautioned them to not let sin progress any further. Rather than throw up his hands in defeat, he kept encouraging them to be faithful to God. He said, **"...be sure to fear the Lord and serve Him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things He has done for you."** - **I Sam. 12:24** Samuel believed that if God's people would only consider how good He had been to them, they would find incentive to reverence and serve Him. He understood that thoughtlessness breeds forgetfulness and forgetfulness breeds ungratefulness.

So Samuel said, **"consider what great things He (the Lord) has done for you."** To **consider** means to think carefully / to contemplate / to meditate or be thoughtful. Though the Bible urges us to make time to meditate on what God has done for us, we don't do this very well! Thoughtfulness is a look back. It's taking inventory of our blessings. If we expect to find time to be quiet before God we'll not find it. We must make time to be thoughtful. The old gospel song says, **Count your blessings.** We must do this deliberately and habitually. Thoughtfulness should be part of a daily routine.

Years ago evangelist Roger Campbell told us he starts everyday looking out his window and thanking God for every blessing he can think of. He practices thoughtfulness. We'll never be more thankful until we become more thoughtful! So let the letter **"T"** stand for thoughtfulness.

H - Humility – This second pre-existing condition to a thankful spirit is a vanishing virtue. The philosophy that shapes our culture insists that man, not God, is the center of the universe.

The other night I listened to a university president say our nation's institutions are turning out a generation of self-absorbed narcissists. As an example, he cited the protests and silly coping mechanisms offered to help students get over the trauma they're suffering because of the election results. In a culture where "self" is pre-eminent, awareness of God's majesty and holiness has all but vanished. Just a few minutes of television proves we no longer fear Him. The Bible calls this worldliness. Worldliness is a world view that says, *"no thanks"* to God and His rule over us. The Bible says the world follows the pattern of Satan. Lifted up in pride, he refused to glorify God. In the same way, pride promotes a spirit of independence and self-reliance which quenches thankfulness.

In **Rev.3:17** Jesus exposed the way a spirit of the pride would affect the church of the last days. He said, **"You say, I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked."** The Laodicean church had everything the world values but they had so little of what God values. Prosperity fueled their pride. In arrogance and self-sufficiency they said, *"look what we have...see what we've accomplished and what our hands have obtained!"* The members of this church were polar opposite to the poor in spirit Jesus blessed in His Sermon on the Mount.

The Corinthians were proud like the Laodiceans. Before they heard the Gospel, their attitudes were shaped by their culture. In his first letter, Paul said they were **puffed up**. Like a blowfish that inflates himself to intimidate predators, their self-estimate overblown! Paul's letter served to burst their bubble. He rebuked their pride by asking a question we should all consider carefully and thoughtfully. He asked, **"What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, then why do you boast as though you did not?"** – **I Cor. 4:7** Here is a pride-busting question that should bring any honest person to their knees. Even the air we breathe comes from God. In the final analysis, there's nothing we can take credit for!

So what is true humility? Humility is a truthful understanding of who I am and what my limitations are. Being humble isn't self-deprecating. Humility isn't the self-pity that wishes we were never born. True humility acknowledges who God is and what He has done for us. Humility is facing how small we are and how great God is. It's realizing how unworthy of His enduring love we are! With heartfelt sincerity the humble sing, *"I need thee every hour, Most Precious Lord."* Yet that sort of humility is a far cry from the pride and self-sufficiency which lies at the root of this thankless generation.

Col.3:12 - **"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."**

Few things quench a spirit of thankfulness more than illusions of independence and self-sufficiency. And few things dispel these illusions more effectively than a job loss / a long-term illness / a failure / or some catastrophic event that turns our world upside down. Earlier this fall, an ESPN reporter spoke about the aftermath for athletes who choked at critical moments. A championship lost because of a missed free throw...a field goal attempt that drifted right...a dropped fly ball...a missed putt. The list of failures is long. The psychological impact of failure can be dramatic and completely humbling. In fact, Asian CEO's who fail in business often commit suicide. Yet beyond failures in sports or business, failure can happen to any of us and failure can be useful if it humbles us.

So let the letter **"H"** stand for **humility**. In **Isa.29:19** we find this promise, **"Once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel."** Humility and a deep sense of personal need go hand in hand. Thankfulness is the joyful response of those who acknowledge how much they need the Lord and how faithfully He meets every need. Though we fail Him often, God never casts us off His own. His grace is sufficient for every disappointment and failure.

A - Appreciation The word *appreciate* means to value or regard something highly. Appreciation is to estimate the quality of things and to assign to them their proper value. A thankful person will be thoughtful and humble, but he/she will also be appreciative. If we reserve appreciation for the big blessings only we might forget how to do it! The challenge of thankfulness is to see God's hand in everything...the big things as well as the little things. **Eph.5:20** says, "**Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" **I Thess.5:18** says, "**Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**" To be appreciative is to find value in everything...in all of life's circumstances.

I'll probably never meet a man more thankful than Bob Anderson. At a church workday, Bob would thank each of us for allowing him to be part of the workday fellowship. The spirit of appreciation he exhibited was light years from complaining attitudes we fall into so easily.

Some years ago when Buzz and Deena returned to serve in Papua New Guinea, Buzz sent an e-mail to say that Deana had suffered another seizure that forced them to come state-side for tests. Circumstances like these can be confusing and very disappointing. Yet Buzz ended his e-mail with these words, "*We expect that God has treasure for us in this somewhere and we look forward to finding it!*" In a later e-mail he wrote, "*We're still looking for the pony in all this.*" That line came from a story I think you'll appreciate.

It seems a single mother had twin boys. As they grew up, one boy became extremely pessimistic while the other became overly optimistic. This loving mother tried everything she could imagine to modify their conditions and encourage them toward a more normal approach to life. But every attempt failed. She finally decided to seek professional help and consulted a world-renown psychiatrist.

"Doctor", she pleaded, "*I've tried everything I know of to cure these extreme conditions! What can be done to help them?*"

"The wise doctor said, "*Things really aren't as bad as you think. Here what you should do. When the boys are away at school, fill the bedroom of your pessimist son with every toy and game you can get your hands on. When he comes home from school and sees these gifts, his pessimism will certainly be overcome by joyfulness. As for the optimist son, order a load of manure from a local stable and fill his room with it. This will undoubtedly shock his optimism into total confusion and dismay.*"

The woman thanked the doctor and said. "*I never would have thought of that!*"

So the next day while the boys were at school, she did as the doctor prescribed and then waited for the boys. When the boys came home she peeked in the door of the room belonging to her pessimist son's. As she listened, she heard him say, "*What's all this junk doing in my room? I can hardly move in here!*"

Somewhat rattled and disappointed, she peeked into the room belonging to her son the optimist. There he was, in his bare feet. His pants and sleeves were rolled up. Standing up to his knees in manure, he was digging as hard as his strength allowed. As she listened, she heard him saying, "*I know, I know, I know there's a pony in here somewhere!*" Like that first boy, some pessimists seem to be hopelessly beyond cure. You say, "I know that guy." But the boy smitten with optimism illustrates the attitude of a believer who looks for God's good outcome in every situation!

Rom. 8:28 says, **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.** Do we really believe that?

Confidence in God's goodness breeds a sense of appreciation that runs deeper than the emotion aroused by crummy circumstances! Faith refuses to see the stuff of life through a lens of disappointment and discouragement. Instead it searches for the good when the good isn't apparent. It thanks God even before the good is discovered. It faces messy circumstances and in effect says, "*I know there's a pony in here somewhere!*" So let "**A**" stand for appreciation. The thankful heart will find value for everything, in everything, and through everything.

N - Not deserved The greek word for **thanksgiving** helps us understand the heart of thankfulness. Thankfulness is **eucharistia**. Right in the middle of this word is **charis**, the Greek word for **grace**. Grace is the cause and thankfulness is the effect. Grace is unmerited favor. It describes gifts that are totally underserved. As we've often said, "*Grace is everything for nothing to those who don't deserve anything.*" It's God freely giving His Son to die for us. Though sinful and deserving of punishment, God sent Jesus to die in our place so we might be pardoned and given the free-gift of eternal life.

The NT draws a sharp distinction between wages and a grace gift. **Rom. 4:4** says, "**Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.**" Wages are owed, but grace is unearned and undeserved. People who congratulate themselves for their blessings, have no reason to be thankful for them. Why should anyone be thankful for what he has earned or for things others were obligated to pay us? But God owes us nothing. Yet because of His great love, He freely gives what we haven't earned and could never deserve. That's the glory of His grace.

Then, having already given us the best He had to give, **Rom. 8:32** says, **He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all - how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things.**" Listen...all that we have, is ours by the grace of God. If "thank you" should ever be said to anyone, it certainly should be said to God! When? On Thanksgiving Day only? No! Thankfulness should be our offering to God everyday and throughout our days.

So let me ask you about your perspective on the things you own? Do you regard these blessings as gifts of grace or entitlements? Having received so much, do you rate yourself worthy of these things or unworthy? If self-sufficiency is the #1 destroyer of thankfulness, believing we get what we deserve, runs a close second. Adam Smith writes, "*Entitlement is such a cancer, because it's devoid of gratitude.*" The song-writer captured the attitude of the undeserving when he wrote, "**Guilty, vile, and helpless we...spotless lamb of God was He. Full atonement, can it be, Hallelujah...what a Savior!**" Only when we take our place among the undeserving, do we have the pre-existing condition necessary to thankfulness.

K - Knowledge I once read about an atheist who barely escaped a head-on collision with a tractor-trailer. Shaken by his brush with death, he claimed he experienced a peculiar emotion. He felt an unexplainable urge to express feelings of gratitude. But try as he might, he couldn't locate anyone to thank. After a few days, this strange emotion wore off. He wrote it off as a temporary psychological phenomena associated with a near death experience.

Unfortunately, many people are in the same boat with that atheist. Their lives are overly blessed, but they don't know **who** to thank! Bryant McGill, a thought leader in the Human potential movement, writes this..."*With all respect to your religion or world-view — thank God, thank the universe, thank evolutionary processes — the keyword is "thank" — just have some gratitude and be thankful.*" Isn't it strange that even the unbelieving find benefit in thankfulness? Yet Christians sometimes live lives of practical atheism. Blessed in many ways, we fail to acknowledge the One from whom our blessings come. We say things like, "wasn't that lucky," or "things just came together for me."

Thankfulness is a confusing impulse when we fail to identify the One to thank. Thankfulness without God is as silly as cheering in an empty football stadium. According to the law of causality or cause and effect, blessings require a Blesser...they don't just happen! But thanksgiving becomes meaningful only when we know the God who is the source of every blessing. The Bible eliminates whatever uncertainty we might have by directing our thankfulness to God. Our hymns are without confusion. One says, "**Now thank we all our God.**" Another urges us to, "**Praise God from whom all blessings flow**".

In recent times clerks are pressured to say, "Happy Holidays" instead of daring to mention Christmas. The politically correct prefer to call Thanksgiving, "Turkey Day". Isn't that a quantum leap for humanity? Instead of risking a theological overtone, we'd rather name a national holiday after the dumbest bird on the planet! But God's children need to be clear about the One who is worthy of our thanks and why He is worthy. Let me share a few verses:

- I Chrn.29:13 - "**Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.**"

- Ps.7:17 - "**I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High.**"

- Ps.75:1 - "**We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks, for your name is near, men tell of your wonderful deeds."**

- Ps.118:28 - "**You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God and I will exalt you.**"

- Ps.136:1 - "**Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good."**

- I Tim.1:12 - "**I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength..."**

In these verses and many others, the object of the believer's thanksgiving is the Creator / the God who alone is true / the God who is Father to our Lord Jesus Christ

So, the Bible is clear when it identifies the One who is worthy of thanksgiving and praise. **Rev.4:9-11** - "**Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to Him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being."** Again in 11:17 - "**We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was..."**

The spirit of thankfulness demands knowledge of who God is. In this day of existential weirdness and colossal stupidity, our thankfulness needs to be focused and precise. **Jas.1:17** says, **Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the Heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.** So let "K" stand for knowledge. And this knowledge comes from God's self-revelation, the Bible. To know God is the basis of meaningful thanksgiving. To grow in our knowledge of Him is to increase the intensity of our thankfulness!

S - Sacrifice A spirit of thankfulness demands expression. William Arthur Ward writes, "*Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.*" A heart that is truly thankful won't be able to contain its enthusiasm!

A Christian song made popular a few decades ago asks, **"How can I say thanks for the things you have done for me... things so undeserved, yet you gave to prove your love for me?"**

So, how should a thankful heart express itself? The Bible way to express thanksgiving is through sacrifice. It's an awesome thing to consider that we have something of value to offer the Lord of the Universe, but we do.

In the OT, God's people were instructed to offer the Lord sacrifices along with "thank offerings." **Ps.50:14 - "Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High." Ps.116:17 - "I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord."** In a spirit of thankfulness for all God had done, the Israelites knew they should give something back to Him. After Jonah's miraculous deliverance from the belly of the fish that swallowed him, he prayed, **"But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you."** I'm with you Jonah!

Thankfulness to God can be expressed as a **VERBAL OFFERING**. It can be expressed privately in prayer or in song - **Ps.95:2 - "Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song."** Singing can be an offering from our hearts to God's heart even if we can't carry a tune. It should be the response of a heart that is overflowing with gratitude. You're no candidate for American Idol, but do you catch yourself humming or singing songs of praise?

Thanksgiving can also be expressed in **PUBLIC WORSHIP - Ps.35:18 - "I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people, I will praise you."** Here thanksgiving can be expressed in prayer, by song or by testimony. **Col. 4:2 - "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."**

Finally, thankfulness can be expressed anywhere as a **SPONTANEOUS TESTIMONY. - Heb.13:15 - "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of the lips that confess His name."** One of the most powerful yet quiet testimonies can be shared by the believer who bows his head and thanks God for a meal. Without making a show of your piety, you can quietly acknowledge the God who provides for you. Someone seated nearby may need a simple reminder just like that.

This is just a sample of the many ways we may express our gratitude to the Lord. Yet the greatest sacrifice we can offer Him is to present our lives to Him. God is worthy to receive our bodies, our souls, our moments, our thoughts, and our desires. It's one thing to utter a few words or sing a hymn with the church family. But it's another thing to offer our lives to the Lord each day. Yet, this is the essence of "thanks-living." Thankfulness should result in lives surrendered to God.

So the pre-existing conditions of a thankful heart are these...thoughtfulness / humility / a spirit of appreciation / the underlying sense that I am not deserving or worthy / knowledge of God / and the eagerness to offer an appropriate sacrifice.

CONCLUSION - In the NT, Jesus healed 10 lepers and only 1 of the 10 came back to thank Him. Only one! These lepers were healed of a deadly incurable disease and not one of them did anything to deserve the healing they received. We need to see ourselves in these lepers. Their healing was for their earthly lifetime only. But the salvation and spiritual healing we receive from Christ is forever! In light of this miracle of grace, few things are less appropriate for a believer than a thankless spirit that grumbles and complains. May the Lord help us to see who we are, what we have, where we're going, and from whom all these blessings come! Here's a challenge and a prayer...may the predominant thought on our minds be this...*"Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"*