

The Blessings of Thanksgiving
Lesson 1: The Key Component of Thanksgiving
Rev. Daniel L. Krueger ~ Bible Study ~ © October, 2016

THE BIBLICAL WORDS

In modern English context, when we hear the word “thanks” it is usually an expression of gratitude from one person to another. To be “thankful” could easily describe either a habit of saying thank you to others, or the emotional state of individual toward God or other people.

When one studies the biblical words usually translated as thanks or thanksgiving, a significantly different meaning is discovered. In fact, one of the Hebrew words typically translated with “thanks” (yadah), is never used to describe one person giving thanks to another person. When that situation is described in Scripture, the verb usually employed is “barach” which means “to bless.”

Yadah, which occurs 114 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, literally means “to throw out the hand.” Often, when yadah is translated as thanks, it is often found along with Hebrew words for praise such as “Hallel” (from which we get “Halleluia”) or “Zamar.” An example is 2 Samuel 22:50

“Therefore I will give thanks (yadah) to You, O LORD, among the Gentiles, And sing praises (zamar) to Your name.”

While Yadah is most often translated with words related to thanks, it is also frequently translated with words very different from our modern idea of thanks. In the New American Standard Version of the Bible, the following words translated “Yadah.”

confess 10, confessed 3, confesses 1, confessing 2, making confession 1

praise 17, , gave praise 1, giving praise 1

give thanks 59, thank 5, give you thanks 5, giving thanks 3, thanksgiving 1, hymns of thanksgiving 1,

glorify 1, placed 1, shoot 1, gave 1, throw down 1

The most frequent use of “Yadah” is the Psalms, where 64 of the 114 occurrences of the word are found, and where it is usually translated with reference to giving thanks. However, outside of the Psalms the word is often translated far differently.

(Lev 16:21) And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess (Yadah) over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness.

(Num 5:7) he shall confess (Yadah) his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.

Turning to the Greek New Testament the word usually translated to give thanks is “eucharisteo.” It is found 39 times as a verb in the New Testament. The verb is a compound word coming from the adverb “Eu” which means “to do well, to be well off, to prosper” and “charizomai” which means “to give freely, to give in favor toward, to forgive.” There is a further root word from which “charizomai” is drawn, and the word is “charis” which means “grace,” which emphasizes the fact that whatever is received was freely given and not a reward or obligation fulfilled.

In 38 of its 39 uses the thanks being given is given to God. Interestingly, in the Greek version of the Old Testament (The Septuagint), “eucharisteo” never occurs. It is a strictly New Testament word.

From these two Biblical words some important aspects of true thankfulness or gratitude may be drawn. To begin with, thankfulness is not a mere emotional experience or attitude toward life. Particularly the Hebrew word “Yadah” emphasizes the confessional nature of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is public announcement of a gift received. Biblical thanksgiving expresses itself in a community of people.

From the New Testament word we also understand that a component of thanksgiving describes the nature of what we receive. Thanksgiving arises from unmerited gifts. What we receive is not earned or deserved, but comes as pure grace and the goodness of other people.

**THE WORLD’S UNDERSTANDING
OF THANKS**

While theologians and philosophers extol the virtue of gratitude, at least one survey among American males found that it is not always looked upon as an important virtue. In a 1988 study of 105 American males, only 20% rated gratitude as a useful and constructive virtue.¹

¹Shula Sommers and Corrine Kosmitzki, “Emotion and Social Context: An American – German Comparison,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 27, no. 1 (1988): 35–49.

Why would anyone not appreciate the notion of gratitude? The answer seems to lie in one of the essential elements of an act that inspires gratitude. As Robert Emmons describes in his work, "The Psychology of Gratitude:"

*"At the cornerstone of gratitude is the notion of **undeserved merit**. The grateful person recognizes that he or she did nothing to deserve the gift or benefit; it was freely bestowed."²*

Thankfulness acknowledges a gift we did not obtain by our own efforts, entitlement or rights. To be thankful implies that your life is in some way dependent upon others. In other words, to be thankful is to rely on grace, and not our works.

Our sinful natures recoil at the thought of grace or dependency. Even the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) thought of gratitude as a humbling experience to be avoided.

Pride, then, seems to be a sort of crown of the virtues; for it makes them greater, and it is not found without them. . . . It is chiefly with honours and dishonours, then, that the proud man is concerned; ...

And he is the sort of man to confer benefits, but he is ashamed of receiving them; for the one is the mark of a superior, the other of an inferior. And he is apt to confer greater benefits in return; for thus the original benefactor besides being paid will incur a debt to him, and will be the gainer by the transaction.³

There are many other ways that we protect ourselves emotionally from the humility that is inherent within true thankfulness. We try to invent ways to see ourselves as somehow deserving, or "entitled" to the exchange of goods or services, even though there was no real payment or service rendered.

Interestingly, our culture has also chosen the term "entitlement" to identify programs that historically would be identified as charity or welfare. This includes Medicaid, SNAP (food stamps), Housing Assistance, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), and at least nine other government assistance programs.

The preferred legal description of these programs is not accidental. It reflects our aversion to admitting our dependency upon others even when that dependency is an undeniable reality. Turning gifts into entitlements is not a mere invention of government. This tendency is found in all human relationships.

Biblical evidence of this is found throughout the history of Israel. When one searches Scripture for the reason God chose Israel as a special recipient of promises and gifts, it is made clear that there was

nothing in Israel that merited such a blessing.

Read Deut 7:7-8

Scripturally what is the only reason God chose Israel.

Despite the clear statements of Scripture that Israel was undeserving of the gift they had received, and the frequency with which Israel abandoned God's laws, later Judaism pictured frequently rebellious Israel in a far more deserving light. The story goes that God actually offered his Torah to all the nations of the Earth. One by one they all reject it, but when God comes to Israel they, of all the nations of the earth, agree to abide by it. They do so without even knowing what is in it, thus deserving, or entitled to, God's special favor (Mek. Yitro, Pes. R. K. 103b, 186a, 200a).

John the Baptist and Jesus scolded the Jews for their "entitlement" thinking, believing that God's favor was some sort of birth rite.

Read Mat 3:7-9, John 8:33-34

Entitlement thinking weaves its way into family relationships. Unpleasant experiences, even if they are not of our own making, are used by our sinful nature to create a sense of entitlement, not only to the resources of others, but to bad and selfish behavior.

This body of work suggests that at a chronic level, individuals who feel that they have suffered in life possess more of a sense of entitlement than do others. . . . In one study, individuals who scored higher on the Psychological Entitlement Scale took more candy from a bowl that was to be shared with children, said they deserved higher salaries than other workers, acted more greedily in a commons dilemma game, and treated their romantic partners in a more selfish manner (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004).⁴

Children whine, even fall down throwing fits in public areas, because you won't buy a certain toy. Perhaps you force them to say thanks after you cave into their demands, but the words are meaningless. Entitlement thinking is already well ingrained in the youngest of children, and propped up by a culture of excessive praise.

Trophies are given out in children's sports just for being a participant. Scores aren't kept so nobody fails. In an ill fated attempt to increase self-esteem in children, parents often excessively praise their children for the slightest effort or accomplishment. The children, in turn, become convinced that they are entitled to praise for whatever they do.

²Emmons & McCullough, "The Psychology of Gratitude," Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 5

³Aristotle, W. D. Ross translator, Nicomachean Ethics, Book 4, chpt 3

⁴Emily M. Zitek et. al, "Victim Entitlement to Behave Selfishly," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2010, Vol. 98, No. 2, 245-255

Instead of becoming more thankful children, children excessively praised become more demanding, and ultimately, more disappointed in life. Rather than building self-esteem, excessive and unwarranted praise actually sets children up for future failure when they encounter people not so easily impressed.

“Children are being increasingly coddled in a culture of false confidence and reinforcement. If they do not learn how to deal with disappointment and failure early on, children will be exponentially more distraught when they inevitably face them later in life. In fact, Ashley Merryman, the co-author of books such as “Losing is Good For You,” referenced a Stanford psychology study that found “kids respond positively to praise; they enjoy hearing that they’re talented, smart and so on. But, after such praise of their innate abilities, they collapse at the first experience of difficulty. Demoralized by their failure, they say they’d rather cheat than risk failing again.”⁵

Gratitude often disappears in marital relationships, as different chores and behaviors come to be seen as payments in kind, or a barter system. An example of this is provided from a study on gratitude in family relationships.

“One man, who said his first marriage's affairs were accompanied by drug and alcohol abuse and who was often away from home, exemplified the first marriage's influence on the economy of gratitude in the second. A reformed family man in his remarriage, he and his new wife argued most about housework. He justified doing little housework in the remarriage by saying: 'I'm home and I'm not drinking or doing drugs. I should be considered a good guy.' He expected his second wife to accept his new improved behavior as a gift, and to express her gratitude by not pressing him to do housework.”⁶

Clearly the understanding of gifts and gratitude is horribly confused in the example above. However, this illustration does demonstrate again how a sense of entitlement destroys thankfulness. Marriage, that should be founded upon unending love, often devolves into a kind of economic union. You do this for me, and I will repay you by an appropriate in kind behavior.

The arguing noted in earlier example, and found in many marriages, is rooted in differences of opinion regarding the “value” of a particular behavior. While the word “thanks” may be frequently exchanged, its use is more akin to the ring of a cash register, than a true expression of gratitude for an undeserved gift.

⁵Laura M Miele Ph.D., "The Importance of Failure: A Culture of False Success", Psychologytoday.com, March 12, 2015

⁶Pyke, Karen, "Entitlement, Obligation, and Gratitude in Family Work" Journal of Family Issues January 1996 vol. 17 no. 1 60-82

It is part of our sinful nature to see ourselves as independent and in total control of ourselves. Even when we are utilizing the help and gifts of others, we invent reasons to see ourselves as entitled to what we receive. We don't like to be in a position where true thanksgiving is required.

Generosity, as Aristotle noted, can be a source of pride, but to need assistance is shameful. Thus we are in a constant quest to find a reason in ourselves to explain the good things we receive from others, and deny the dependency we have on the goodness of others, including God.

The religions of Buddhism and Hinduism could be said to have originated from a desire to avoid thanksgiving, though most would define its origins more as explanation of the seemingly unfair nature of the world. In both religions, the teaching of Karma and reincarnation are central to the understanding of life.

Why do good things happen to bad people, and bad things to good people. Karma explains this phenomenon with reference to deeds in our present and past lives catching up with us. If something good happens to you, whether you are presently evil or good, you are being repaid for some goodness in the recent or distant past. The same is true if something bad happens to you, regardless of whether you are presently a good person or bad person. In others words, life is about getting what you are owed. However, if you are merely getting what this life, or a past life owes you, why should you be thankful?

Despite the countless blessings Adam and Eve had in the garden of Eden, the one temptation that lured them away from God was to see themselves as God, no longer dependent upon their creator, but self-reliant. In other words, capable of living life without having to thank anyone.

This desire to see ourselves as totally self-reliant is observable at virtually any age. I learned this first hand trying to help a two year old down some stairs, and receiving an angry response: “I can do!”

I have visited with kind and generous individuals mystified by the behavior of co-workers. When observing them struggling with some task, their offers of assistance are met with comments such as, “*What, don't you think I'm capable of doing my job?*” No such implication was ever intended. The difficult tasks often require help, but this particular co-worker seems to prefer struggling alone to any form of mutual assistance. Isolation is preferred to team-work.

Christian literature extols thankfulness. Philosophers throughout the ages have frequently identified gratitude as the king of virtues.

“A fool's life is empty of gratitude and full of fears . . .” (Epicurus)

“A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all the other virtues.” (Cicero, Oratio Pro Cnæo Plancio, XXXIII)

Despite the accolades given, and the importance attached, to gratitude, it remains and oft ignored and neglected virtue among people. Somewhat surprisingly, even the conservative author and politician Bill Bennett, in his 1993 popular work, *"The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories,"* focuses on ten virtues as follows:

"self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty and faith."

Notable by its complete absence: Gratitude!

The secular field of Psychology has also, until recently, largely ignored gratitude. As also reported in Robert Emmons book on gratitude:

*The term **gratitude** rarely appears in the emotion lexicon (Shaver, Schwarz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987) . . . and not at all in the presumably comprehensive **Encyclopedia of Human Emotions** (Levinson, Ponzetti, Jr., & Jorgensen, 1999)⁷*

If we have rightly identified a core prerequisite of thankfulness (gratitude) as a recognition that a gift is "undeserved," then the apathy, and even antagonism, toward a grateful life is readily explained by a right understanding of a sinful and corrupt world. One would also expect that where religion is on decline, gratitude amongst people will also decline.

Modern studies of both the effect of gratitude on the lives of people, and the factors which help people cultivate a grateful life, are only in the beginning stages. However, there is already a few studies that confirm a close link between a religious life and a grateful life.

What is meant by a religious life is not mere religious belief. Studies that look at behavioral effects of religion consistently show that religious belief, unaccompanied by regular church attendance, has either no effect on behavior and sometimes even a negative effect on positive behaviors. By contrast, when religious belief matches religious worship activity virtually all positive behaviors are strongly influenced. Quoting from a study investigating the link between religion and gratitude:

"The second major finding in this study involves the potentially important role that religion may play in shaping feelings of gratitude in late life. The data indicate that older people who attend worship services more often are likely to feel more grateful over time than older adults who do not go to church as often. Moreover, the findings reveal that at least part of the effect of church attendance on gratitude may be attributed to the intervening influence of God-mediated control beliefs. Put another way, these results suggest that people who go to church more often tend to have stronger God-mediated

control beliefs and people with stronger God-mediated control beliefs, in turn, tend to feel more grateful. These findings are noteworthy because this appears to be the first time that the relationship between God-mediated control beliefs and gratitude has been evaluated in the literature."⁸

One of the core beliefs of Christianity is our unworthiness before God. Scripture abundantly testifies to the fact that we deserve nothing from him. To the contrary, we did nothing to earn our lives, and because of our sin, we deserve nothing but punishment.

Read Rom. 3:10-20

Who deserves anything but judgment from God?

In Lutheran worship services, the Christian frequently begins the service confessing with other Christians that we deserve nothing from God but "temporal and eternal punishment" for our sin. Such a confession leaves no room for "entitlement" thinking, but encourages people to believe that even the smallest blessing of life is completely undeserved. Even if we could claim to be without sin, still our lives and all that we have are not a payment earned, but an undeserved gift given.

Read Luke 17:7-10

Even if we could do everything God commanded of us, what do we deserve?

It is doubtful that the close connection between worship attendance and grateful living is accidental. Where the whole word of God is being proclaimed, not only will people be reminded regularly to be thankful, they also will be taught an essential element of gratitude; namely, that all we have is but an undeserved gift from God.

When we look at life from a perspective that we are entitled to nothing, a life of unending gratitude is made possible. Such a life is illustrated in G.K. Chesterton's biography of St. Francis of Assisi:

It is commonly in a somewhat cynical sense that men have said, "Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed." It was in a wholly happy and enthusiastic sense that St. Francis said, "Blessed is he who expecteth nothing, for he shall enjoy everything." It was by this deliberate idea of starting from zero, . . . that he did come to enjoy even earthly things as few people have enjoyed them; (chapter 5, p. 22)

⁷Emmons, McCoullough, p. 4

⁸Krause, Neal, "Religious Involvement, Gratitude, and Change in Depressive Symptoms Over Time" Int J Psychol Relig. 2009 July 1; 19(3): 155-172

The Blessings of Thanksgiving

Lesson 2: Barriers to Thanksgiving and Ways to Cultivate Thanksgiving

Rev. Daniel L. Krueger ~ Bible Study ~ © October, 2016

All basic human experiences have a natural opposite. A few examples are pride versus humility, joy versus sorrow, love versus hate. So what is the emotional opposite of gratitude? Those who study gratitude have found that there are at least 4 common elements to the experience of gratitude.

- 1) I received something I value.
- 2) What I received came from the good intentions of others.
- 3) What I received was not owed me, I didn't earn it, but it was totally undeserved.
- 4) I want to celebrate what I have received with others, including the one giving a gift.

Simple failure to recognize a gift, or "ingratitude," is not necessarily the inverse of all of these elements. Resentment actually inverts all the elements above.

- 1) Someone else has what I value.
- 2) I don't possess what I value due to the bad intentions of others.
- 3) I am owed or deserve what is possessed by others.
- 4) I am angry, though I may not openly express this fearing the reactions of others.

Before the fall Adam and Eve lived a thankful life with God. However, as Satan approaches Adam and Eve his goal is not to make them merely ungrateful. but to make them resent God, believing that they have a right to claim for themselves what he possesses.

- 1) **Some one else has what I value.** *Gen 3:5 "you will be like God, knowing good and evil"*
- 2) **I don't possess what I value due to the bad intentions of others.** *God lied (Gen 3:4-5) "You will not surely die. [5] God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened,*
- 3) **I am owed or deserve what is possessed by others.** *(Gen 3:6) "The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate."*
- 4) **I am angry about that which I don't have, though I may not openly express it fearing the reaction of others.** *(Gen 3:8-12) Adam and Eve hide from God and also blame God and each other for their sin.*

The behavioral change in the life of Adam and Eve was not founded upon any alteration of their life circumstances, or a change in God. What changed is their perception of what they had, and didn't have, and their belief regarding God's intentions toward them.

One of the classic parables of Jesus highlights the role that perception plays in resentment. The scenario of *"The Laborers in the Vineyard"* is that of a land owner going out at different hours of the day to hire laborers. He hires laborers at six in the morning, nine, noon, three in the afternoon, and again at five. At six in the evening he begins paying the laborers, starting with those hired last.

The workers hired first agreed to a denarius, a fair days wage for that era. They most likely were grateful for being hired. In that era begging was the only alternative to unemployment. However, at the end of the day, specifically because they saw what others were paid, they expected to receive more, and became resentful and angry toward the master.

Read Mat 20:11-16

How did the laborers hired first understand the master's intentions?

How did the Master understand his intentions?

Research has shown, as Scripture clearly teaches, happiness (called *"Subjective Well Being"* or *"SWB"* in scientific literature), is unrelated to demographics such as age, intelligence, gender, material wealth, or even life circumstances. Personality traits, however, show strong correlations with levels of SWB.⁹ Most important for understanding what leads to a life of gratitude is the specific focus of the human heart.

Are you focused on what you have, or don't have? Are you always comparing what you have to what others have? Do you constantly compare your looks or abilities with others? While life is full of positives and negatives, do you dwell on the negative?

While gratitude is not listed as one of the 30 personality traits generally identified in modern psychological research, inventories that measure gratitude, when compared with personality profiles, show very consistent correlations. Gratitude shows the strongest negative correlations to depression, anger, and vulnerability. The three personality traits with the strongest positive correlations are positive emotions, warmth, and altruism (concern for others).¹⁰

⁹Emmons, McCoullough, p. 169

¹⁰Wood AM1, Froh JJ, Geraghty AW, "Gratitude and well-being: a review and theoretical integration.", *Clin Psychol Rev.* 2010 Nov;30(7):890-905

Should the parable of the laborers told by Jesus be renamed the parable of the “unfair landowner” or the parable of the “generous landowner?” Obviously Jesus would choose the latter, but the former is the more natural choice of a sinful world.

Depression, which shows the strongest negative correlation with gratitude, does involve brain chemistry and can be treated with medications. However, modern research shows that depression is not a mere biological condition. Depression also involves learned thinking styles that, over time, functionally alter our brain chemistry and wiring.

Modern research into treating depression points to a combination of medication and psychotherapy as the best treatment option, though most people still treat depression only with medication. One study found the difference in relapse rates for patients receiving combined therapy was 25% versus 80% for patients receiving drug therapy alone.¹¹

The goal of psychotherapy is to alter thinking styles and life practices that support negative styles of thinking. Several of these thinking styles are closely related to our ability to recognize and celebrate gifts we have received and experience gratitude. While lists of distorted thinking styles vary slightly in number and description, there are three that generally appear on most lists. They are called **1. Disqualifying the Positive**, **2. Mental Filter**, **3. Jumping to Conclusions by A. Mind Reading or B. Negative Prediction**.¹²

“Disqualifying the Positive” is perhaps the most obvious distorted thinking style that diminishes our ability to be thankful. Some examples of this thinking style are as follows:

- a. *You studied hard for a test and got the highest grade in the class. Your instructor pulls you aside and says, “I can see from your test that you have a real grasp of this material.” You respond by saying, “No, I’m just a good guesser.”*
- b. *You just had a professional portrait taken. Someone tells you that you look beautiful and you respond by saying, “No, the photographer is just really good at touching up stuff!” or someone tells you that you look great in a certain outfit and you respond, “Yeah, it hides the fat well.”*
- c. *Someone very positively evaluates a project you have been working on. When a friend asks you how your evaluation went you tell them the evaluator’s response but then qualify it by saying, “I think they were just trying to be nice to me.” or*

put an even more negative spin on it, “I think there buttering me up to make we work harder!”

In each of the circumstances above there was an obvious opportunity to be grateful, but gratitude is not the result. Just like he did with Adam and Eve, Satan convinces a person, with no outward evidence, that the person giving them praise is a liar.

As Jesus spoke in Luke 17, when we have done all that we are commanded, we shouldn’t be expecting any special praise. *“We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”* But if the master would choose to praise us and say, *“Job well done!”* would it be our place to respond to him, *“Liar!”*

It is said of people suffering from the eating disorder anorexia, that when they look in the mirror they still see themselves as fat, even when their bodies look like skin bones. Our sinful nature blinds us to good even when it is right in front of us, as well as blinding us to evil when it is obviously lying.

Godly humility does not address God or others as liars when they praise something good we have done. Rather, Godly humility accepts praise as a gift, and though undeserved, it responds with gratitude.

Another way we avoid gratefulness is “Mental Filtering.” Examples of this style of thinking are:

- a. *You remember or talk about mostly negative events from childhood. Yet, the rest of your family remembers many happy events in your childhood.*
- b. *Driving in heavy traffic several drivers wave you in as you periodically change lanes on your way home, but one driver needlessly speeds up and cuts you off. When you get home you exclaim to your family that “there are no kind drivers left in the world. Everyone is just out for themselves.”*
- c. *You have a good job that has provided well for your family. You’ve been with the company for 18 years. Recently you were hoping for a promotion, but someone else got the job. You say to yourself, “I’ve just totally wasted 18 years of my life.”*

Working with depression, I developed an exercise asking people to write a 500 word essay on the good things that happened in their worst period of life. This was not an essay on good that came out of that period, but actual blessings experienced in the worst of life.

Most people struggled in their first essay attempts to name any good in the particular period of life they identified. However, as class members went through several rewrites, they all eventually wrote about beautiful blessings they had blocked out of their minds. As an example, one class member kept harping that in her worst life period all of her friends and her fellow church members had deserted her.

It was the 4th rewrite when she finally recalled that members from her church visited her unbelieving father who was dying in a hospital during this “*worst period.*” Countless times this woman had witnessed to her

¹¹Fava GA, Rafanelli C, Grandi S, Conti S, & Belluardo P. “Prevention of recurrent depression with cognitive behavioral therapy: Preliminary findings.” (Archives of General Psychiatry, 55:816-820, 1998)

¹²Burns, David D., “Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy” (Avon Books, 1980, 1999 p. 42)

father and constantly prayed that he would confess Christ as his Savior, to no avail. However, during one of the visits by fellow church members, God used their testimony to create faith in her father's heart. Her father died confessing Christ as his Savior.

The exercise transformed her memory of the "worst" period of her life. She could no longer remember that time without giving thanks for her friends, her church, and God's saving work. Like others in the class, she found that in all circumstances she could give thanks to God.

It is part of our sinful nature to block out the good and only remember the bad. Conscious of this tendency, the apostle Paul wrote these words while in prison for preaching the gospel.

Read Philippians 4:6-9

It seems that Paul's counsel in Philippians is not a mere suggestion for our random thoughts, but is a recommendation for intentional exploration of our life and planned inclusion into our prayers with God, and communication with others. The benefits of intentional activities that focus our minds and our prayers on blessings is supported by research into happiness, or what researchers designate as "Subjective Well Being."

Researcher Steve Toepfer at Kent State conducted a study comparing groups of people who weekly wrote three letters, spending 15-20 minutes on each letter, thanking someone in their life. A control group spent the same amount of time each week filling out questionnaires regarding their personal well being.¹³

The group merely filling out questionnaires on their well being experienced no change in their well-being. The other group, however, experienced significant changes. The more they wrote, the more happy and satisfied they were with life. Depressive symptoms steadily decreased. In addition, those writing letters had improved perception regarding their family bonds and decreased perception of family criticism.

In three rather large studies, individuals were broken into three groups and asked to keep either a daily or weekly listing of one of the following three: burdens, items/events of gratitude, or neutral life events.¹⁴ Those who counted their blessings experienced significant positive changes in multiple areas of life. This included reported well-being, health, sleep, increased exercise activity, and increased acts of kindness toward others. People felt life was better and were more optimistic about their futures.

These and other recent studies affirm what

¹³Toepfer, S.M., Cichy, K. & Peters, P., "Letters of Gratitude: Further Evidence for Author Benefits," *J Happiness Stud* (2012) 13: 187

¹⁴Emmons, Robert A.; McCullough, Michael E., "Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 84(2), Feb 2003, 377-389

Scripture taught long ago. To begin with, a thankful life is not a haphazard result of our inherited biological programming or our life circumstances. Thankfulness is an intentional effort to focus our attentions on the blessings that God surrounds us with each and every day. Our sinful nature wants to erase our memory of these blessings, and instead focus our attentions only on the sorrows and hassles we experience in life.

While our sinful self blinds us to the blessings of God, the scriptural truth is that we are surrounded every day be blessings. (*Lam 3:22*) *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; [23] they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

What the studies also affirm, as Scripture taught, is that when we intentionally focus on God's blessings, God's peace increases its presence in our hearts and lives. Our experience of joy and happiness increases not by obtaining more blessings from God, but by exploring the fullness of the blessings we already have.

One fascinating aspect of the research into intentional acts of remembering blessings, is that the optimal frequency of this activity seems to be (drumroll) one week.¹⁵ Is it mere coincidence that God commanded us to make one day sacred for remembering him and resting from our labors?

In understanding the ways in which our mind rejects opportunities for gratefulness one final thinking style worthy of examination is identified as "Jumping to Conclusions." As we began examining the nature of gratitude, a critical element in producing gratitude was:

- 2) *What I received came from the good intentions of another.*

"Jumping to Conclusions" destroys gratitude by introducing evil intent into situations where it does not exist. As we discussed "Disqualifying the Positive" earlier, this technique was in fact a fundamental tool in allowing people to dismiss compliments.

Jumping to conclusions is further divided into two different techniques. The first is "Mind Reading" which is a thinking style where we automatically read negative motives into the good actions of others with no outward evidence. One example would be:

- a. *You walk into a room and see a group of people whispering. You are convinced that they are talking negatively about you.*

Adam and Eve were taught this technique by Satan, reading evil intentions into God's actions with no outward evidence. They simply believed Satan when he called God a liar.

The second technique used in jumping to

¹⁵Lyubomirsky S, Sheldon KM, Schkade D. Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology*. 2005;9:111-131.

conclusions is called “Negative Prediction.” You can anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact. One example would be:

- a. *You are having pain but won't go and see the doctor because you know that he is going to tell you that you have a cancer tumor and you will die soon. Why bother the doctor?*

Having completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at M.D. Anderson, Houston, TX, I became acutely aware of the tragedy of this style of thinking. On a regular basis the hospital had patients referred to them with cancers easily cured and readily diagnosed in early stages. Tragically, when the patients first noticed the disease (early stage) they were so afraid it was cancer they refused to see a doctor, even when encouraged by family.

Both types of “Jumping to Conclusions”, “Mind Reading” and “Negative Prediction,” are ultimately rooted in an attempt to assume we have knowledge or control of things which only God knows and controls. Only God, and each individual, knows what goes on within the human heart, and to God alone belongs the right to judge the human heart.

Read 1Co 2:11, 1Sa 16:7

How does God's ability differ from man's?

Read Isa 46:9-10, 1Cor 2:9, Pro 16:3-4, Jer 29:11-12

Who alone knows the future?

How does God's prediction of our future differ from our predictions for our future?

For our purposes, the last quotation is worthy of special note because it emphasizes a particular aspect of Christian truth that exponentially increases opportunities for gratitude. Not only does God plan good for us, but God can even accomplish good through that which our sinful nature sees only as evil.

Christians have a unique perspective on gratitude that is rooted in the cross. The cross represents horrible pain and suffering of an innocent person, yet it is prominently located in the front of most Christian churches as an emblem of praise and thanksgiving.

A fundamental truth of Christian teaching is that God is actively at work in all things, even the evil and trouble of the world, to bring us blessing.

Read Rom 8:28

Because of God's promises, guaranteed to us in the cross, Christians find more opportunities to be grateful than the rest of the world. Thus, in Scripture, we find these encouragements.

Read 1Th 5:16-18, Eph 5:19-20, Ps 34:1

The thankfulness of those who trust in God is incomparable in multiple ways. To begin with, our thankfulness is not rooted in comparison with what we have versus what others have. Christians recognize that God not only has made each of us different, but blesses us in unique ways according to his goodness. (*Rom 12:4-6, 2 Cor 9:8*).

You can not discover the fullness of God's blessings or God's plan for you by looking at others. While we are all equally loved by God, God has a unique and different life plan for every individual, and equips each of us differently according to that plan. If you don't have something someone else has, it is because God knows you don't need it.

The thankfulness of those who trust in God is also incomparable in that there is never a moment where God ceases to work for our blessing. Our sinful nature is constantly searching for reasons to dismiss the blessings we receive, or simply tries to block the blessings we have received from our memories. We need to battle against our sinful nature with intentional acts of remembering his goodness toward us, for *'God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* (*Heb 13:5*)

The thankfulness of Christians is also incomparable in that they see reasons for gratitude in places that the world sees only pain, suffering, wickedness, and injustice. Through the cross of Christ, Christians learn to be thankful in all circumstances.

Ultimately, the thankfulness of those who trust in God is incomparable because God gives us gifts beyond anything the world can give. As Paul says: (*Rom 8:18*) *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

The more intensely we experience gratitude, the more powerful is its affect on our life. We, who deserve death and eternal hell have been granted a glorious life in heaven through the unmerited forgiveness Jesus purchased for us on the cross. The more we understand the magnitude of this gift, the more trivial the problems of this life become.

The traditional Jewish Passover features a song entitled “Dayenu” which means “*It would have been enough.*” The song recounts God's mighty acts. The word “Dayenu,” suggests that if God's blessings stopped there, Israel would still be eternally grateful. To this Jewish song Christians add the work of Christ.

Condemned by physical death and eternal hell, do we really need any other reason to give daily thanks to God for the gift of His Son? It would have been enough! Yet, God does give us even more. (*Rom 8:32*) *“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”* For all the reasons cited, it must be said that true thankfulness is incomparable.

The Blessings of Thanksgiving

Lesson 3: The Ways Thanksgiving Transforms Us and Others

Rev. Daniel L. Krueger ~ Bible Study ~ © October, 2016

God did not send his Son to die for the sins of the whole world so that we could simply go on living. Christ died to redeem us for a new life free from sin and the selfish desire inherent in a life of sin. In other words, we were redeemed to live a life of love and generosity toward others. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.

(2Co 9:11) You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

Not surprisingly, the recent research into gratitude has demonstrated a reciprocal relationship between gratitude and generosity. In other words, the more thankful you are, the more generous you become. Conversely, the more generous you are, the more grateful you become for your own blessings. As one author put it, "There is something generous about the virtue of gratitude."¹⁶

As noted earlier, the three personality traits with the strongest positive correlations to a grateful disposition are positive emotions, warmth, and altruism (concern for others). With modern medical imagery that can identify brain regions responsible for different emotions and thinking processes, it turns out that these positive correlations are not accidental. Indeed, God wired the thankful mind to care about others.¹⁷

When we experience gratitude, it is not merely the reward centers of our brain that light up, as they might when taking a bite of the best cheesecake or prime rib you have ever eaten, sipping the most savory wine, or slurping the best chocolate malt. In addition to reward circuitry, brain centers involving moral judgment, connecting with others, and empathy light up. True gratitude is a social and moral experience that motivates us to bond with others.

Research investigating the link between gratitude and generosity is very new and very sparse. However, the studies done to date clearly indicate a strong relationship between the two characteristics.

One study used data gathered from 244 women five times in a period from 1964 to 1993. The goal of this particular study was to measure concern and activity at mid life for future generations. In other words, it investigated whether people were primarily focused on self or others.¹⁸

¹⁶Emmons & McCullough, pg. 68

¹⁷Glenn R. Fox, et. al, "Neural correlates of gratitude," *Front. Psychol.*, 30 September 2015, 6:1491

¹⁸B E Peterson, A J Stewart, "Antecedents and contexts of generativity motivation at midlife," *Psychol Aging* 1996 Mar;11(1):21-33

Women who were most aware of being positively influenced by others as young adults (outside of parents) showed the greatest interest in influencing future generations seventeen years later. In other words, people who expressed more gratitude for other people in their lives, were more interested in serving others with their own life.

Another study sought to create a "grateful" state of mind, and then presented participants with an opportunity to show kindness. A mixed group of 105 participants were evenly divided into three groups and placed in a setting that was intentionally designed, without their knowledge, to produce a state of gratitude, amusement, or no intentional manipulation of emotion. After the activity, when the experiment appeared to be over, an opportunity to show kindness to their fellow participant was created.¹⁹

The opportunity for kindness was spending up to half an hour assisting the fellow participant in filling out additional tedious paper work for a work-study credit. The result was that the people in the gratitude state extended an average of 8 helping minutes more than the amused state, and 5½ helping minutes more than the neutral state participants.

This same experiment was repeated but modified in two ways. Only two emotional states were created (grateful and neutral), and an opportunity to help a complete stranger with the same tedious paper work was introduced. For both fellow participants and total strangers, people in a grateful state of mind were willing to help roughly 29% longer than people in their normal state of mind.

In the world of philanthropy gratitude is universally recognized as a significant motivator for giving. As one author writes:

Over the course of two decades I have interviewed over 250 individuals from across the economic spectrum about their motivations for care. A virtually universal disposition which we encountered is the propensity that many summarize by the simple yet heartfelt phrase "to give back." It turns out, however, that upon probing we unearth an impetus that is even more vital than this salutary phrase suggests. Invariably, beneath the desire to give back is a sense of gratitude, and behind that gratitude is an appreciation of blessings, grace, gift, luck or fortune. Gratitude is an active, mobilizing

¹⁹Monica Y. Bartlett and David DeSteno, "Gratitude and Prosocial Behavior Helping When It Costs You," *Psychological Science*, May 2006, 17(4):319-25

*sentiment; a discerning encounter with blessing animates a response of care for others.*²⁰

Not only does the giver's gratitude increase generosity, but gratitude shown by recipients of the gift motivates even more giving. According to the 2013 "Burk Donor Survey"

"one in three donors {33%} polled said that they were less likely to give again to organizations that are late in acknowledging gifts"

Up to 80% of donors polled say receiving a prompt and meaningful thank you that includes follow-up results will ensure a second gift

Not only does being grateful prompt you to give, but giving raises your level of personal happiness and gratefulness. We have all heard the expression that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Several studies into human behavior actually prove that increased "prosocial" behavior increases personal happiness.

Mining the data of a survey of 30,000 households, researchers have found that the more we give in time, talent, or treasures, the happier we are. The survey is called the "Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey."

According to the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, a survey of 30,000 American households, people who gave money to charity in 2000 were 43% more likely than non-givers to say they were "very happy" about their lives.

*Similarly, volunteers were 42% more likely to be very happy than non-volunteers. It didn't matter whether gifts of money and time went to churches or symphony orchestras — givers to all types of religious and secular causes were far happier than non-givers.*²¹

One large research project on personal spending combined large national surveys with experiments where people received windfall gifts.²² In the national survey of 632 adults a clear trend emerged. Personal spending had no real correlation with personal happiness. However, the higher your level of "prosocial" spending (gifts to others or charitable donations), the higher you scored on measures of personal happiness.

Based on the survey results, the researchers then looked at a real world situation where employees were to receive bonuses at their work. Personal happiness, along with personal spending habits, were measured both before receiving the bonus and 6-8 weeks after.

²⁰Moody, Micael and Breeze, Beth, "The Philanthropy Reader", Routledge, Aug 25, 2016

²¹Brooks, Arthur C. "Does Giving Make Us Prosperous?", Journal of Economics and Finance; Fall 2007; 31, 3; pp. 403-411

²²Dunn, Akin, Norton, "Spending money on others promotes happiness," Science. 2008 Mar 21, Vol. 319, Issue 5870, pp. 1687-1688

The size of the bonus did not predict any changes in personal happiness. However, the employees who spent a higher ratio of the bonus on "prosocial" spending showed a significant increase in happiness.

The researchers then conducted an experiment regarding windfall income. A number of volunteers (46) were given an envelope of either 5 or 20 dollars. Half the group was told to spend the money on a bill or to treat themselves, the other half was told to spend the money on someone else. The money had to be spent that day. Before and after the experiment the volunteers reported their personal happiness.

The size of the windfall (\$5 or \$20) had no effect on changes in personal happiness. However, those who spent money on others were significantly more happy at the end of the day than those who spent their money on themselves. The act of giving, and not the size of it, is all that mattered. Thus, proving that "It is the thought that counts."

One final survey from this study may be the most interesting aspect of the entire study. In a following semester with 109 new students, the experimental situation of receiving \$5 or \$20 was presented and the students were asked what would make them more happy, spending the money on themselves or on someone else.

Contrary to the research results, the students overwhelmingly believed (86%) that the \$20 would make them happier than \$5, and most people (63%) believed that spending the money on themselves would make them happier than spending it on others. Based on the earlier experiment, the size of the gift had no effect on happiness. The only thing that mattered was if you spent it on yourself or others.

Generosity and gratitude exist in cyclic relationship. The more grateful you are the more generous you are, and the more generous you are the happier and more grateful you become. In giving, we receive, and in more ways than we may realize.

There are a few Bible verses that suggest the benefits of giving are not merely in the emotional and spiritual realm, but in the physical realm as well.

(Pro 11:24-25) One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. [25] Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.

(Mal 3:10) Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

(Luk 6:38) give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.

From the research of Arthur Brooks, quoted earlier, data on personal income and volunteering strongly suggest a healthy correlation between donating and personal income. In fact, for every \$1 in charitable giving Brooks estimates an increase of roughly \$3.75 in household income.²³ While Brooks does not speculate on the mechanisms for this, others have suggested several reasonable reasons.

A grateful and generous person is more focused on people than things. Perhaps it is not gross income that grows as we give more, but net income, after credit card and other debts have been subtracted.

People who live in a grateful and generous state may reap financial, as well as other rewards based on the attitude they exhibit and the ethics they live by. Dave Ramsey of "Financial Peace University" writes.

The tithe, which is a scriptural mandate, was not instituted for God's benefit because He already has all the money He needs. He does not need our money.

So why does He ask us to give 10% to Him? Tithing was created for our benefit. It is to teach us how to keep God first in our lives and how to be unselfish people. Unselfish people make better husbands, wives, friends, relatives, employees and employers. God is trying to teach us how to prosper over time.

Many people have observed that after they stopped tithing, their finances seemed to get worse. In the Book of Malachi, God promises that if you do not rob Him of your tithing, He will rebuke your devourers and protect you.

If you cannot live off 90% of your income, then you cannot live off 100%. It does not require a miracle for you to get through the month. I think that if you sit down and look at your budget, you will see that you can make it while giving at least 10%.²⁴

In addition to the emotional, spiritual, and financial benefits of giving, it also appears there are health benefits as well. One study from Stanford University²⁵ found that dedicated volunteers were 56% more likely to be alive at the end of the study than non-volunteers who began with identical health.

Gratitude not only motivates us to be more generous, when we express it to others, it significantly increases their desire to be generous as well. In one study, researchers randomly divided university fund-raisers into two groups. One group made donor

²³Brooks, "Does Giving. . .", p. 408

²⁴<http://www.daveramsey.com/blog/daves-advice-on-tithing-and-giving>

²⁵Harris, Alex and Thoresen, Carl, "Volunteering is Associated with Delayed Mortality in Older People: Analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Aging" J Health Psychol December 2005 10: 739-752,

solicitation phone calls with no change to their work routine. The second group received a pep talk from the director of fund-raising, which included a high dose of praise and expressions of gratitude for their work. The next week, the second group made 50% more fund-raising calls than the first group.²⁶

If you have noticed a lot of waiters and waitresses signing their name on your final check with a brief "Thank You," there is a economic reason for that tiny extra effort. On average, that little word increases your generosity to them by roughly 13%.²⁷ If you normally tip 16% your tip rises to 18%.

Earlier we mentioned the importance in philanthropy of retaining donors through prompt expressions of gratitude. However, that practice not only helps retain donors, it actually increases what they give.

If you don't thank donors promptly, you're destroying all the rest of your hard work. Get the thank you out the door within 48 hours. Period. No arguments.

People will try to tell you they don't care if they don't hear from charities for a week... a month... whatever. Don't believe them. Penelope Burk, author of Donor-Centered Fundraising, has proven donors care about promptness. In one test with board members calling within 48 hours, those called gave an average of 39% more than those not called – and they gave 42% more after 14 months! This research has been recently confirmed, and it's definitely something I'd recommend you test for yourself.²⁸

Note well that the powerful effect of gratitude is not rooted in a good feeling that we have. As we observed in our first lesson, the Hebrew word usually translated as giving thanks does not describe a mental or even verbal action. "Yadah" describes a physical and publicly observable action; that is, to stretch out our hands.

In modern culture gratitude is treated like a noun. It is a feeling we have or an expression. The biblical understanding of gratitude and thanks is a verb. It is an action we undertake. When thanksgiving becomes an action, it brings blessings to everyone, including the person giving thanks. Interestingly, the idea that thanksgiving brings blessing to the one giving thanks seems to have been built into the regulations surrounding the "sacrifice of thanksgiving" outlined in

²⁶Grant, Adam M. and Gino, Francesca, "A Little Thanks Goes a Long Way: Explaining Why Gratitude Expressions Motivate Prosocial Behavior," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2010, Vol. 98, No. 6, 946–955

²⁷Lynn, W. Michael; "MegaTips 2, Twenty Tested Techniques to Increase Your Tips," Cornell Hospitality Tools, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2011

²⁸Axelrod, Clair, "The 7 Keys to a Donor Retention Strategy Full of Thanks," <http://npengage.com/nonprofit-fundraising/> Jan. 22, 2014

the Old Testament. The regulations concerning this voluntary sacrifice were outlined in Leviticus.

Read Leviticus 3:3-5, 7:11-15, 33-36

What portion of the animal did God receive?

What portion of the animal did the Priests receive?

What was to be done with the rest of the meat from the thanksgiving offering?

Read Numbers 15:7-12 (hin=roughly 1 gallon)

Besides an animal and bread, what was also required in a peace offering?

The voluntary peace offering is the only offering described in the Old Testament where the worshiper himself partook of the meal. While thanksgiving offerings fell under the rules for peace offerings, it had extra conditions attached to it.

Along with a sacrificial animal, three types of bread were to be provided:

(Lev 7:12) If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the thanksgiving sacrifice unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and loaves of fine flour well mixed with oil.

Another feature of special to the thanksgiving offering is that all food had to be consumed in one day, whereas other peace offerings could be consumed over a two day period.

(Lev 7:15) And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten on the day of his offering. He shall not leave any of it until the morning.

The thanksgiving offering was quite unique among all the sacrifices described in the Old Testament. Understanding its precise nature gives new meaning to the Psalms that mention it.

(Psa 50:12) "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. [13] Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? [14] Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, [15] and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

The sacrifice of thanksgiving, as a peace offering, was the one offering where God did not consume any of the flesh. The fatty portions were offered to God, but all the meat was consumed by either the priests or the worshipers. Again we read from the Psalms:

(Psa 116:12-19) What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? [13] I will lift up the cup

of salvation and call on the name of the LORD, [14] I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. [15] Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. [16] O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have loosed my bonds. [17] I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD. [18] I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, [19] in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!

Here we see the feast of thanksgiving wonderfully portrayed. God is gathered with his people for a wonderful feast. Cups are filled with wine and being lifted up as people call on the name of the Lord. The location is the courtyard in the house of the Lord, and though not specifically mentioned, fine breads of all types are present as well.

Psalm 116 has special meaning, as it is the final Psalm in what Jews refer to as the "Hallel of Praise." During Passover at the time of Christ Psalms 113-114 would be sung before the final meal blessing, and Psalms 116-118 afterward.

(Mat 26:27-30) And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, [28] for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. [29] I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." [30] And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

It is not by accident that celebration of the Lord's Supper begins and ends with thanksgiving. It is the sacrifice of thanksgiving. Christ is there with his flesh, and blood that was poured out as an offering to God, but that flesh and blood given to God to pay for our sins has also brought about peace between God and man. Thus, God not only receives the offering, but it is given to us, along with unleavened bread and wine, to eat and to drink. The Liturgy begins:

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**
Lift up your hearts. **We lift them to the Lord.**
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give him thanks and praise.**

Following the Supper

O Give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, **and His mercy endures forever.**

The Prayer of thanksgiving

The Blessing From God Gave Aaron to speak

Gratitude to God, in both Old and New Testaments, was not just an emotion or thought, nor mere words on our lips in prayer. Jesus said, "Do this to remember me." True thankfulness is an action, and the act by which God wanted us to show our thanks to him, was a feast where he himself provided the sacrifice.

The Blessings of Thanksgiving

Lesson 4: Vocation and Thanksgiving

Rev. Daniel L. Krueger ~ Bible Study ~ © October, 2016

As noted earlier in several ways, one of the keys to a grateful life is your mental focus. Are you focused on what you have, or don't have? Are you always comparing what you have to what others have? Do you constantly compare yourself with others, focusing on what they look like or can do, versus what you are and can do? While life is full of positives and negatives, do you devote your attention to what is positive or negative?

As also noted earlier, grateful people have a strong tendency toward altruism (focusing on the bringing benefit to others, rather than to self).

One of the significant teachings of Scripture that Martin Luther restored during the reformation was the doctrine of "Vocation," or in the Latin, "Vocatio." The Roman Catholic Church of his era, and still today, taught that certain ways of living were more "holy" than others. Beyond the Ten Commandments, the Catholic church still teaches that those who obey the "Evangelical counsels" (adopting the consecrated life of a priest, nun, or monk) experience

"a 'more intimate' consecrate, rooted in Baptism and dedicated totally to God. In the consecrate life, Christ's faithful, moved by the Holy Spirit, propose to follow Christ more nearly . . ." (Catholic Catechism, 1994 p. 241)

Luther realized that the concept of one person being "more holy" than another denied Scripture in two significant ways. First, the concept of one person being more holy than another denies Scripture's teaching regarding our sinfulness.

Bible reading: Romans 3:10-24

According to Scripture, who naturally seeks God?

In God's sight, can one person be "holier" than another?

What is the only "holiness" that we can possess?

Since "holiness" is a gift of God through Christ, then, Luther reasoned, when we are behaving in "holy ways" it is not our holiness that we can claim, but God working in and through us.

Read Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 1:6 and 2:13

When we do good works, who is the one who creates the will and the ability to do that good work?

Luther further recognized from Scripture that whatever blessings we experience on earth, be they through Christians doing good works out of their love for God, or through non-Christians out of selfish motives, these blessings were still from the hand of God.

Read Romans 13:1-5

Who is responsible for the blessings that we receive through government?

What we accomplish in life is based on God working through us and equipping us with gifts and resources. God doesn't gift everyone for every task. Even at creation he makes us male and female, giving us different abilities and responsibilities. We all have different gifts, but it always God at work in us.

Bible Reading: 1 Cor 12:1-13

Though we all work in different ways, who is the one who is accomplishing the work in and through us?

Where did our different works come from?

What is the purpose behind God's distribution of gifts (v. 7)?

Make a list of the gifts described in 1 Corinthians 12.

Read Romans 12:4-8

Make a list of the gifts described in Romans 12.

How do they differ from the gifts described in 1 Corinthians 12?

While we have different gifts, how are we still the same?

Speaking about our "vocation" in life, Luther said, *"All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in struggle, in government-to what does it all amount before God except child's play, by means of which God is pleased to give his gifts in the field, at home, and everywhere? These are the masks of our Lord God, behind which he wants to be hidden and to do all things."* (exposition of Psalm 147)

Luther learned from Scripture that it is God who gives us our gifts. God is hidden behind every good thing we do whether you are a milk-maid, or a priest, a gas station attendant, or president of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. From Scripture's point of view there is only one calling that matters: the call to faith in Christ. Luther writes:

You see from this that St. Paul considers no single estate blessed except this one—the estate of being Christian; the others are free in the sense that they cannot in themselves further our salvation or damnation. All of them, however, can become blessed through faith or damnable through unbelief, even though in themselves they be well maintained. (AE of LW, vol 28)

What we do for Christ, be it hauling garbage or trading funds on the New York Stock Exchange for billion dollar investment fund, are holy works and means by which God answers our prayer to provide us with daily bread. Both individuals, Luther would say, are merely masks behind which God is hiding and caring for you. All these acts are necessary and can be regarded as holy.

As Scripture points out we are all part of one body in Christ Jesus, but not all body parts are the same. For the body to function properly each part must rejoice in its own work.

Read 1 Cor 12:13-31

What is key to the proper functioning of the body?

Which parts of the body should receive the most attention?

How would a proper application of these principles change behavior in the work place? At schools? In the home?

When we rightly understand vocation, we become grateful because we understand we already have everything we need to accomplish God's will for our lives. There is no sense in looking at what others have, because God made them for a different purpose than us.

A right understanding of our "Vocation" allows us to maximize the use of our own gifts, blessings, and opportunities to serve Christ. It allows to be grateful for what we are and what we have.