

A NEGLECTED COMMAND COLOSSIANS 3:15b

“And be thankful.”¹ Only three words comprise our English text; but the text is assuredly appropriate on this Sunday before our national day of Thanksgiving. It serves to remind us of one of the essential characteristics marking the person who knows the Living God. I have often wondered how the atheist celebrates Thanksgiving. He lives in a land of bounty and enjoys the multiplied mercies of God. To whom does the atheist give thanks at Thanksgiving? What a contradiction when the atheist has been spared injury and, reflecting on the providential deliverance the wretch utters the words: “Thank God.” Thanksgiving at the best must be a hollow day with mixed emotions for the atheist.

The day must likewise be hollow for the non-Christian. Sitting down to a groaning table filled with the rich bounty of the land, the unbeliever knows he should express gratitude, but to whom shall his gratitude be expressed? The unbeliever may utter words of gratitude to an unseen God, yet he can never know if his words were acceptable. However we are Christians and we are commanded to be a thankful people. Are you thankful? When you sit down to a meal tomorrow, for what will you give thanks? And to Whom? Let’s think about this for the next several minutes.

THE BASIS FOR THE COMMAND — “And be thankful.” The heart of the command is the Greek word *eucháristos*. We obtain our English word “Eucharist,” a term commonly used for the Lord’s Supper among liturgical churches, from this Greek word. The Meal is the Thanksgiving, and we approach the Table with thankful hearts. That knowledge moves us toward the source of this command, for the word indicates an obligation to express gratitude for a favour performed. The gratitude we express arises out of the grace of God and that which He has done for us. Has God done anything for which we should be grateful? Has God actually acted in our behalf in such a way that we can be thankful? We will benefit greatly from considering just what God has done for us and the multiplied benefits for which we should be thankful.

I suppose I could speak of God’s character and point each of us to the revelation He has given in order to make us aware of our responsibility to be grateful to Him. He is omnipotent. All power resides in Him. If His power is displayed on our behalf, surely we should give thanks. If He has restrained His hand from judging us as we deserve, surely we ought to be thankful. God is omniscient. He knows all things and He certainly knows us. Knowing our innermost thoughts, He still receives us and shows us grace and mercy. Surely, we should be thankful that He receives us. God is omnipresent. He is ever with us. When comforted by His presence, have we no obligation to give Him thanks? God is merciful, and who of us has not received mercy from God? Having known His mercy, shouldn’t we be grateful to Him? God is compassionate. Knowing His compassion in our times of sorrow and grief, have we cannot be other than thankful? God is loving toward all that He has made. Having tasted the love of God, what sort of wretches would we be if we refused to give Him thanks? God is good and we have experienced His goodness. We should be grateful for His goodness.

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I hesitate to focus so intently on God's character that I fail to remind each of us that we Christians are a blessed people. You may well recall that the Apostle Paul, when writing to the Corinthian saints, challenged them to think of God's multiplied demonstrations of grace. He probed deeply into their consciences with his queries: "Who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it" [1 CORINTHIANS 4:7]. In our modern sufficiency we need to be confronted with this same penetrating challenge.

If one of us has wealth and worldly goods, have we considered how we obtained our possessions? We either received our possessions from others as an inheritance or we received strength, ingenuity and abilities from God and these have permitted us to accumulate our goods. If we have position and power, was it not God who gave us the stamina to persevere and was it not God who gave us the strength to toil until we attained that position we hold and the power we possess? If we have perspicuity and perceptiveness, understanding and intelligence, surely it was God who gave us insight and wisdom. "What do you have that you did not receive?" The ability to perceive the good creation and the ability to enjoy life and family—these are gifts from God.

Someone has rightly cautioned that if we cannot be thankful for what God has done for us, perhaps we ought to be thankful for what God has not done to us. We surely deserve condemnation, but we have received grace instead. Consider what life would have been had God not shown us grace. The Apostle, writing the encyclical we call the letter to the Ephesians observed that there was a time when we were in the world. We "were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" [EPHESIANS 2:12]. There was a time which we do not like to remember and of which few of us speak openly. Then, we were "dead in the trespasses and sins" [EPHESIANS 2:1] and we were separated from Christ. It was a time when we were excluded from citizenship in Israel and we were thus foreigners to the covenants of the promise. If this were not terrifying enough, we were each **without hope and without God in the world**. Dare we recall those awful days when we were lost?

As Christians, that situation no longer prevails. Instead, we enjoy access to grace and goodness. "But now," begins the Apostle in order to mark the difference in bold strokes, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" [EPHESIANS 2:13]. Remember the contrast between what once was and what now prevails. Whereas once we were under sentence of death and excluded from all access to God, now we have been brought near . . . near to what? Near to God. Near to grace. Near to goodness. We have been given a reason for gratitude.

Recall those dark words penned in **ROMANS 1:18 ff**, and in particular **verses 18-21**. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

Please notice the sequence, for it is an outline of how either a society or an individual is led to utter degradation. The wicked are objects of divine wrath—*now*. The reason the lost are destined for destruction is that they know God and yet reject God. That is, the wicked know God exists because all creation testifies to His Being. Mankind knows God exists because His Spirit moves and works in the world about them. They understand that they bear responsibility to God, and yet they have chosen to exclude God from their life. Now take careful note at what point the condemned and wicked (whether an entire society or an individual) first begin to reject knowledge of God: “they did not honour Him as God or give thanks to Him. The decision to reject God arises from an ungrateful heart. Take heed how you respond to the grace and the goodness of God, for He is the source of “every good gift and every perfect gift” [JAMES 1:17].

Here is the thought I would have you carry away from this portion of the message: God is worthy to be glorified and it is to Him that we must show gratitude. He is the source of all that we are and all that we possess. Because He is God, we ought to be grateful to Him. To fail to express gratitude to Him is to take the first disastrous step toward condemnation and to begin the slippery slide into oblivion.

THE BARRIERS TO THE COMMAND - The verb Paul uses—*gínomai*—implies becoming, assuming a particular characteristic, or being changed. The fact that he employs the present tense speaks to the need to make this a habitual action. In short, Christians are commanded to endeavour to be grateful. Don’t you find this unusual? Throughout the Word of God are commands which upon reflection appear odd. As an example of such odd commands consider the repeated commands to “love one another.” I should think that love was natural and that Christians by nature would be a loving people. Another such odd command is this command to become thankful. Aren’t Christians a grateful people? Don’t we naturally exude gratitude and thanksgiving? The answer to the question is that gratitude is difficult. But why should gratitude be difficult?

One reason thankfulness is difficult—and why we therefore require a command to be grateful—is that **GRATITUDE IS UNNATURAL**. By this I simply mean to point out that our natural state is to focus on self without being overly concerned for others. Our first parents sinned and fell from a position of intimacy with God. Fallen, they made a startling and stunning discovery. Whereas God has previously been central to their lives, now “self” was enthroned and central.

Read again **GENESIS 3:7-13**. “The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

“And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’”

Notice the response of the man and the woman after their rebellion against God. They were *self-deceived* and they thus ate of the fruit and rebelled against the Lord God. They were *self-conscious*, “They knew they were naked.” They were seized with a sense of *self-preservation*, they were afraid and they hid. They were *self-centred* and attempted to place the blame for their actions on others—the man blamed the woman directly and God indirectly, and the woman blamed the serpent. Since that time the essence of sin may be defined as the enthronement of self to the dethroning of God. Because self is central to human existence, gratitude toward others is unnatural.

Have you ever considered how this is evident in everyday life? Advertising focuses on our sense of need for self-fulfilment, our sense of concern for ourselves. *You deserve a break. You deserve the best. We do it all for you.* Even among the people of God this sense of self-preservation and self-concern is both resident and regnant altogether too often. Thus Paul could aver in the Ephesian letter: “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it” [EPHESIANS 5:29].

Another reason we find it difficult to express thanks, whether to God or to man, is that **GRATITUDE IS DEMANDING**. Gratitude demands that we focus on the goodness of another. Gratitude demands that we recognise the kindness of another. When we are grateful we are forced to become specific about what another individual has done for us. Thanksgiving demands that we speak of the acts of another instead of remembering our own actions. This is not an easy task for the natural man!

I believe that the Apostle meant by this brief command to lead readers to express gratitude to God for His peace, it is evident that the manner in which we are to express such gratitude is through open expression of thanks to fellow members of the Body. Reviewing the verses preceding the text I find that thanksgiving flows out of lives that reflect *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Tolerance of differences, forgiveness and love* for one another all precede thanksgiving. In short, gratitude is dependent upon these other great virtues and is therefore demanding.

A final reason that thanksgiving is difficult is that **GRATITUDE IS HUMBLING**. To offer thanks to another is to confess that we had a need in an area and thus tacitly acknowledge that in that one area another has met our need and is perhaps superior to us. Pride, despite protestation to the contrary, clings to each of us tenaciously and threatens every effort to express gratitude. When we thank another we are saying that we are recipients of goodness or mercy. In a sense we are confessing that we are needy in the area where that other has ministered to us. The human spirit rebels against expressing such humility. Remember the words of Scripture, which teach us, “‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” [JAMES 4:6-10],

Again, the Word of God admonishes, “‘Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” [1 PETER 5:5, 6].

THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE COMMAND — What would happen were we truly grateful? Ask yourself, “What changes would take place in my life were I truly thankful?” If tomorrow we were suddenly to be seized by an overwhelming sense of gratitude, what effect would that have in our lives? I rather suspect that all these characteristics Paul has written of in the verses preceding this delightful little command would be expressed throughout the congregation. We would be a church marked by *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness* and *patience*. The world about us would be forced to note that we demonstrate a *tolerance of differences, forgiveness* and *love* toward one another. May I suggest that God would be glorified and it would be evident that He indeed resides among His people? We would experience revival with the consequence that the lost would find our Faith attractive. Drawn to the brightness of Christ among us they would be compelled to confess, “God is really among you!

Permit me to wax practical at this point providing recommendations for being thankful. My recommendations are simple: invest time in exploration of God’s goodness to you; take time to organise the names of fellow believers so that you regularly review how you have been enriched by them; then communicate your gratitude to fellow believers for their impact in your life. Let’s review these recommendations one at a time and see how we may apply each in our individual situations.

The first recommendation was that we *recognise God’s goodness to us*—both His goodness generally and His goodness specifically. What has God done that is good? Perhaps you recall the words of Jesus in **MATTHEW 5:45**: [God] “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” God is good to the whole of mankind and not to a few only. The Apostle, in **ROMANS 2:4** declares that “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.”

The Psalmist writes in **PSALM 145:9, 13b-17**:

“The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.”

...

“[The LORD is faithful in all his words
and kind in all his works.]

“The LORD upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.

“The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.

“You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.

“The LORD is righteous in all his ways
and kind in all his works.”

David’s words are a wonderful testimony of God’s goodness and of His gracious treatment of all that draws breath. Surely, He has shown us more kindness than we have right to expect from Him!

God is good and each of us should be able to testify to His goodness. We live in a land of freedoms. Some may argue that we have too many freedoms, but the alternatives are clearly not attractive. Witness the vast numbers of individuals who voluntarily forsake their natal lands each year to make Canada home. The fact that Canada has enjoyed peace and prosperity is assuredly a mark of God's goodness toward us. Despite news articles to the contrary, ours is a land of prosperity and plenty. Though some haven't as much as they wish, it seems fair to say all have sufficient to insure that none need claim impoverishment. Millions throughout the world would willingly sacrifice everything to live at what Statistics Canada identifies as the poverty line.

Specifically, consider the goodness of God toward you. In my own life I can see marvellous evidences of His kindness. He redeemed me from my sin. He did not abandon me in my difficult days. He never surrenders me to discouragement. He has supplied me with a multitude of friends. He placed me in His service. He permits me to pastor a gracious congregation of wonderful people eager to do good. He supplies my needs. He gives me health and the ability to enjoy His creation. I have all I need and more. He has given me a wonderful wife and three beautiful children. He has caused me to laugh in the face of disaster. He has given me immediate access to His heart.

Sit down today and write out a list of the demonstrations of goodness which God has given you. When you have compiled that list, reflect on the specific demonstrations of goodness which you can claim. You will discover that God is good and that He has given you cause to praise Him for His goodness. You will find that God is surely to be thanked, and your Thanksgiving Day will be transformed.

Recall that glorious hymn of the Faith:

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,
And you will be singing as the days go by.

When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings, money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.

So, amid the conflict, whether great or small,
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;
Count your many blessing, angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.

Isn't it true! God is over all! Because God is good and because He is sovereign, we have each received grace upon grace. What a gracious God!

Perhaps it would be a good thing if tomorrow we were to share our respective lists at the Thanksgiving table. What an encouragement to rejoice in the goodness God has shown toward each of our families as they are gathered tomorrow. I am convinced that such a practise would build others in the Faith and it would glorify God.

The second practical recommendation to assist in becoming an even more grateful people is that we ***take time to organise the names of fellow believers***, considering how each has been used of God as an expression of His goodness. By this I simply mean that we need to see that the individual men and women whom God has placed within this congregation each are evidence of His loving kindness to us as a congregation.

I cannot begin to tell you how I am enriched by the service and by the presence of some within the Body. Some of the acts of encouragement and some of the acts which have strengthened me are so very personal that I would not dare speak of them openly. Yet there is not one of you that have not personally made my life richer as you exercised your ministry which God assigned.

From time to time I find it helpful simply to sit down with a list of the members of the congregation, taking the time to review what God has done through the men and women who share in the life of Body as they enrich my life, equipping me to fulfil my own ministry. Through this process I begin to view the individuals surrounding me not as mere mortals, but as expressions of the goodness of God.

I encourage you to make a list of members and friends, reviewing the names of the individuals listed there. Pause with each name, whether the process requires a week, a month, or several months, thinking how that individual has blessed your life. As you recall how God has used each individual you will discover a new richness within the Body of Christ and you will praise and glorify God who has given us one another.

The last recommendation, which flows quite naturally from the former, is that you ***communicate your gratitude to fellow believers for their impact in your life***. Reviewing the goodness of God leads us to praise Him and to offer Him thanks, just as a review of the way in which others have blessed will lead us to express our gratitude to them as well. John instructed Gaius: "Greet the friends there by name" [3 JOHN 14 NET BIBLE]. It imposed on his friend the responsibility to know the individuals and to speak to them individually. Just so, we are accountable to know how the individuals God has placed among us have blessed us and then we are morally responsible to inform them that we recognise their love and goodness.

Crusty old Carlyle married a beautiful and sensitive woman who was his intellectual match. They lived together, though he was insensitive and unkind in many of his actions and remarks. After Jane's death, Carlyle read her diary and therein discovered the most profound grief of soul of which she never spoke openly. She wrote of her sorrow at not being recognised for her intelligence, her grief at being taken for granted, her sadness as result of his neglect. It is reported that Carlyle, upon reading the diary went to her grave and cried out: "Oh, Jane, if only I had known. If only I had known." His own self-centred view of life had excluded this precious jewel and cut her to the quick, making her life an ongoing tragedy.

Such self-centred neglect should never happen among the people of God. If we but realise the goodness of God expressed through the people He has placed among us we ought to abound in expressions of gratitude to one another as well as to God. May I commend to you the practise of both giving God thanks for those He has given to us and speaking to at least one individual each week to express your thanks for the ministry of that individual. Perhaps it is personal or perhaps it is general. Tell one another how much you appreciate the love and the faithfulness expressed.

Above all else, do not permit yourself to slip into such neglect of speaking of your gratitude to the God who gives you life. Do not be content with merely mouthing words, but demonstrate thanks to Him through loving service among His people. To do otherwise, is nothing less than a tacit admission that you have enthroned someone or something else as being of greatest worth in your life. Let's work at becoming a grateful people. Amen.