

THE HEART
OF THANKSGIVING
STRONG SOULS (5)



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Heart of Thanksgiving

The Heart of Thanksgiving
Strong Souls (5)
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The Heart of Thanksgiving

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The Heart of Thanksgiving

Welcome to *The Heart of Thanksgiving*

While fear of God is the *first* affection we must guard in our heart, and love for God and neighbors is the *greatest*, thanksgiving is the *most practical* of affections, because it's so easy to do.

Well, it should be easy to do, at any rate. In fact, we must work hard at the discipline of thanksgiving, because God commands us to give thanks in everything. That's a tall order. But we must accept this challenge and begin getting our lives in shape for giving thanks to God as a way of life. For when we do so, our peace increases, and we grow in the knowledge of the Lord and His glory.

And that should be quite enough to get us going on this most practical affection.

A strong soul demands a well-kept heart, and thanksgiving is a crucial discipline for keeping our heart and strengthening our soul.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Most Practical Affection

...because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools... Romans 1.21, 22

The nature of affections

Keeping our hearts with all diligence involves having the right affections in place and keeping them properly focused and intensified. All affections are valid, but only when they function as God intends. A strong soul begins with a well-kept heart, grounded in the fear of God and growing in love for God and neighbors. This doesn't just happen, of course; we must attend to our soul to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, knowing, as we do, that God Himself is at work within us to will and do according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2.12, 13).

Christians do not deny the value of *fear*; however, we recognize that we must fear God, and nothing in this life, not even death. And we know that *love* is the greatest affection, but only when we keep self-love in check, so that we can love God and our neighbors for beauty, goodness, and truth.

Affections are not merely feelings. They're not just attitudes or aspirations. Affections engage our mind and conscience on their way to being expressed in words and deeds – hopefully, those which bear witness to Jesus.

But to make sure our affections work this way, we must be exercised for their best use. And this makes thanksgiving a most important attitude of the heart. Fear is the *first* affection to master, and *love* is the greatest. Thanksgiving, meanwhile, is the *most practical* of affections, because it's both the easiest and the most readily available, since we are called to *give thanks in everything*. Thanksgiving creates a platform for exercising *all* our affections as God intends.

The heart given to thanksgiving will be trained to master all the affections in ways that enable us to show Jesus to the world. It will also strengthen us against the tendency to drift into sin.

Failure to give thanks

Romans 1.18-32 unfolds a tragic vista outlining the course of human history in a cycle that is repeated generation after generation. It is a tragic litany of rebellion, distancing from God, moral decline, misery, woe, and death. It shows us what issues from hearts devoid of gratitude to God.

God graciously and energetically makes Himself known to the people of the world, revealing His eternal power and divine nature through the things of creation and culture (vv. 19, 20). His purpose in this is that human beings, piqued by the majesty, grandeur, bounty, goodness, wisdom, power, and mystery of the created world, would recognize the hand of God and devote themselves earnestly to seeking Him (cf. Acts 17.26, 27).

However, rebellious humankind chooses a path that leads to a deserved death. Three times in this tragic account we read that God “gives them up” to debasing, degrading, and destructive behaviors (vv. 24, 26, 28). Each successive “giving up” accelerates a downward spiral into greater spiritual rebellion, moral degradation, and social and cultural collapse. This is nothing other than the wrath of God, which He is revealing from heaven against all the unrighteousness and ungodliness of people who, by their ingratitude, offend against divine holiness and justice, and suppress the truth of God (v. 18).

Wherever, following this pattern, people have rejected the knowledge of God, spiritual confusion, moral decline, social upheaval, and the abuse of humankind and creation have abounded. God's plan to fill the earth

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with goodness and bounty has been denied, ignored, assailed, and substituted for by human beings who insist they know better than God how they ought to live. The end of all such hubris is, of course, death (Prov. 14.12).

But let's not miss what I consider to be the most important part of this passage – the hinge on which humankind swings away from the grace and goodness of God into a life of rebellion and self-destruction. That hinge, that all-crucial turning-point, is *ingratitude*. Because people refuse to acknowledge God and to give Him thanks for His many gifts and great bounty, God gives them up to gods of their own making, to the worship of self, things, and sensuality, and to the destruction of their bodies, societies, and souls. There is no fear of God before their eyes, and the love that rules in their hearts is focused primarily on themselves.

The importance of thanksgiving

Thanksgiving matters to God. Because He is our Creator and Sustainer, because we would neither exist nor be able to continue in life apart from His constant and steadfast love, we owe a debt of gratitude to God, a debt which is easily enough repaid, and which He receives with satisfaction and pleasure, like sweet incense offered to His nostrils.

Yet giving thanks is among the most neglected of human duties toward God. Even among those who know the Lord, we are more likely to express grumbling and complaining, and take the goodness of the Lord for granted, than to give thanks always and in everything.

But if the *lack* of thanksgiving is the first step down the slippery slope of self-love, sin, rebellion, and destruction, *learning to give thanks* is a spiritual solution to many ills, a solution that can bring us peace in times of hardship, joy in times of want, and a witness for our loving Lord and King before every person to whom He sends us day by day.

Thanksgiving is the simplest and most practical exercise for keeping our soul in shape to serve the Lord.

For reflection

1. Meditate on Romans 1.18-32. How do you see this pattern reflected in our world?
2. What do you understand by *thanksgiving*? When is thanksgiving appropriate? For what?
3. The standard for thanksgiving is to give thanks always and in every situation. Does that describe your experience?

Next steps – Transformation: Think of five ways you might bring more thanksgiving into your life. Focusing on these, practice giving thanks throughout the day ahead.

2 The Call to Thanksgiving

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1
Thessalonians 5.16-18

God's will

I don't know how many people I've encountered, over the course of my ministry, who struggle with the question of God's will for their lives, but there have been quite a few.

Young men just out of college, guys on an uncertain career path, church leaders piqued by a missionary testimony, pastors wondering whether God wants them to move on, or someone wrestling with questions of family or finances: all such people want to know the Lord's will for their lives. They sincerely want to serve and please Him, and they want to have that deep-seated sense of doing the right thing in whatever it is they're facing.

Such desire to know the will of God is laudable. Seeking God's will, and submitting to it, is crucial to keeping our hearts with all diligence. It shows that we both fear Him as we should – since to follow a path contrary to His will can bring discipline (Heb. 12.3-11) – and love Him as He intends – for we earnestly desire to be where He wants us to be, that we might be with Him, loving others in His Name.

But is it possible to *know* the will of God for our lives? Don't we just have to search out the possibilities, make an informed decision, and trust the Lord to guide and bless?

That may be true in certain areas of our lives, but there is at least this one thing we can say for sure about God's will for every single follower of Jesus Christ: He wants us to give thanks in all circumstances.

Thanksgiving, in obedience to the will of God, provides a foothold for further progress in knowing His will for other areas of our lives.

How easy is that?

This is what makes thanksgiving the most *practical* affection. First, how easy is it to *memorize* 1 Thessalonians 5.18? "...*in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" Any *child* could memorize that in one day! By memorizing that verse and repeating it often, you train your mind to think in terms of thanksgiving, and your mind helps to shape your heart for the practice of it.

Second, how easy is it to *pray*, "Thank You, Lord"? Many people stumble around seeking the right words for their prayers. But there's no guesswork here, no searching for pious-sounding phrases, no fear of overstepping our bounds. Just, "Thank You, Lord," no matter what comes up, or what you may be doing.

Let's consider this a bit more carefully. First, as Joni Eareckson Tada is quick to remind us, God calls us to *give* thanks, not to *be* thankful. In other words, we must not base our practice of thanksgiving on whether we *feel* gratitude over the situation or circumstance in which we find ourselves. Thanksgiving is an act of the will, based on understanding God's Word, and deriving from a prior commitment to obey the Lord, whatever He requires. *Feeling* gratitude is not a prerequisite for *giving* thanks. Fearing and loving God, and resolving to obey Him according to all His will, *is*. By giving thanks, however, we exercise that sector of our heart that helps to make us truly thankful people, for whom thanksgiving is as normal as breathing.

Thanksgiving is an act of obedience, based on fearing and loving God, and trusting in Him. We trust that God is all-wise and all-sovereign, and that He does all things well and works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are walking within His purposes (Rom. 8.28). *Loving* God, therefore, we are

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determined to *obey His will*, and His will is that we should give thanks in everything. *Giving* thanks without *feeling* thanks is not hypocrisy; it's obedience. The Spirit of God, Who leads us to give thanks, will exercise our soul for greater strength in thankfulness to the extent that we are diligent in giving thanks in all things.

In, not for

Second, notice that Paul says it is God's will that we give thanks *in* all circumstances – not necessarily *for* them. These are two very different prepositions. "In" is locative; it relates to where we are, the context or circumstances in which we are caught up or involved. No situation, no combination of conditions, no adversity or trial or setback does *not* qualify as a platform for thanksgiving. In all such situations, we can learn to give thanks to God.

"For", on the other hand, takes our circumstances not as the *context* of thanksgiving but the *rationale* or *cause* of it. But God is the only final *object* of our thanksgiving. The circumstances of our lives change; God does not. The situations in which we find ourselves at any moment may be pleasant and agreeable or difficult and threatening. We do not give thanks *for* these situations, as though they were the cause of any blessing or boon. But we do give thanks *in* them, *for* the goodness and faithfulness of God, because the God Who loves us and does all things well and for our good does *not* change, even when our circumstances do.

Finally, note that thanksgiving is an action of the soul and body. It begins within, where we are determined to obey God, and it comes to expression in some form of word or deed, offered to God to acknowledge His greatness, sovereignty, love, and faithfulness. Here, in a microcosm, is how a strong soul works to make a strong and obedient, God-honoring body. What we determine in the soul will come to expression in words and deeds. The stronger our soul, the more God-honoring will be our words and deeds.

Thus, thanksgiving is not simply a frame of mind; it is an act of obedient faith, it is the very will of God for our lives. And as such, it provides a model for training the rest of our heart for loving God and our neighbors as the greatest of all affections.

If you're casting about to know God's will for you, there's no better place to begin than in giving thanks wherever you are, whatever is going on around you, and regardless of whether you feel particularly thankful for it all. For this is the will of God for you who are in Christ Jesus.

For reflection

1. Is there a difference between feeling thankful and giving thanks? Explain.
2. How can we give thanks *in* every situation, and really mean it?
3. What are we saying to God when we give thanks in everything?

Next steps – Transformation: Make a short list of things you want to give thanks for today. Carry that list with you, and pull it out from time to time, taking just a few moments to offer up your gratitude to God, whether you feel like it or not.

3 The Object of Our Thanks

*Oh, give thanks to the LORD!
Call upon His name;
Make known His deeds among the peoples!
Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him;
Talk of all His wondrous works!
Glory in His holy name;
Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD!* Psalm 105.1-3

God in everything

A well-kept heart is the critical core of a strong soul, and nothing exercises the heart toward God more than the practice of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving nurtures true gratitude, which abounds in love for God and overflows in love for our neighbors. So it's no wonder, as we have seen, that it is the will of God for those who are in Christ Jesus to give thanks in every situation and all circumstances. Failing to give thanks means taking for granted or denying the sovereignty and goodness of God, turning away from Him to our circumstances, and entering the spiral of rebellion and drifting from the Lord. God is God – holy, righteous, true, good, loving, and wise – even when *everything* is going wrong in our lives.

Yet even when our circumstances are extremely *favorable*, our giving of thanks must reach beyond them, beyond any experience of blessing, beyond giving thanks merely *for* such conditions, to acknowledge and applaud the One Who orders *all* our circumstances according to His wise, good, and perfect will.

At their *best*, the circumstances of our lives should serve above all to remind us of God, Who grants us His blessings in His way and time. At their most *disagreeable*, our circumstances should do precisely the same. As giving thanks aims at this proper focus, without regard for the specific nature of our circumstances, *feeling* grateful will grow in us more and more. The gratitude we *feel*, in other words, will be the upshot of the thanks we *give*. If we try to base thanksgiving the other way around – waiting until we feel gratitude before we give thanks – we will not fulfill the will of God for us.

Thus, *practicing* thanksgiving nurtures thankfulness in our hearts, and makes us ready for the next opportunity to give thanks in everything, no matter what.

A sense of God

What this means is that we need at all times to have a clear and unshakable *sense* of God – Who He is, how He relates to us, the place our lives occupy within His economy, the ways He is revealing Himself, His Presence with us, Him watching over us, and so forth. For when our focus is on God, when God is the object of our thanksgiving and we are growing in the knowledge of our Lord, nothing in our circumstances will be able to deter or distract us from celebrating His eternal goodness, wisdom, power, and love.

Allow me to make a few observations concerning God which it will be good for us to bear in mind, if we are to succeed in practicing thanksgiving as He intends.

First, God is our *Creator*. Apart from Him, neither we nor anything in the vast cosmos would exist. God was not required to create us. He does not need us, and He gains no glory from us, save that of His own which we refract back to Him. God made us because of love, because of a free desire within Himself to express His love into a creation that includes us and all the people in our lives.

Our very being, therefore, is a platform for the manifestation of the eternal and pure love of our Creator God. So likewise is all the vast creation around us, which speaks continuously to us of the glory of its Creator

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(Ps. 19.1-4).

Second, not only is God our Creator, but He is also *sovereign*. That is, nothing that exists *continues* to exist apart from His intimate and personal attention to every single detail of all that is. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, upholds the world and all things in it by His powerful Word (Heb. 1.3). While we can understand that this is so, we cannot fathom the mechanics of it, not fully, at any rate, except to realize that, if God the Word should ever cease speaking His power toward us – however that works – we would certainly cease to exist.

We and the cosmos we inhabit are not the products of eternal matter randomly colliding, expanding, and morphing over vast eons of time. Nor is our continued existence merely the result of impersonal “laws” of chemistry or physics. We are here because of God, and we continue to be here because He upholds and provides for every aspect of our being. There’s plenty for which to give thanks in contemplating this great mystery and truth.

Finally, God’s essential disposition toward all His creatures is *love*. He loves the vast cosmos which He created and sustains (Jn. 3.16). He loves even His enemies, who ignore or deny Him, or even mount attacks against His holy name and Law (Matt. 5.43-48; cf. Ps. 52.1). And He loves those He has redeemed through Jesus Christ our Lord. In His love for us He thinks good thoughts toward us and bears good gifts to us – all the innumerable blessings by which we survive and thrive each day. These are all the good gifts of our loving God, Who made us and sustains us solely because He is love.

Keep in mind that God is not *obliged* to love us. He chooses to, freely, constantly, and lavishly. He gains nothing by loving us. But we gain everything.

Worthy of our thanks

Does such a God deserve the thanks of His creatures? Assuredly, He does.

What ingrates we are who take for granted our blessings, our lives, our very existence, and fail to give thanks to God in every situation and at every opportunity. What churls we are, receiving daily of God’s bounty and love, yet failing to give thanks to Him *in* everything, as often as we may, regardless of who may hear us.

We give thanks to God, not because of the *circumstances* of our lives, but because of the *God* Who rules our circumstances, and because of the unfathomable goodness and steadfast love He expresses toward us at every moment.

And we give thanks because this great God *commands* it, knowing, as He does, that thanksgiving is so important to maintaining a well-kept heart and a strong soul.

For reflection

1. Why is it important to give thanks in *everything*, and not just when everything is *going well*?
2. Suggest some ways of keeping God more in mind throughout the day.
3. Giving thanks out loud is a way of fulfilling our calling to be His witnesses. Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: Write out a brief prayer of thanks to God, based on Who you understand Him to be. Today, use that prayer for giving thanks to the Lord, just because of Who He is.

4 The Promise of Thanksgiving

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4.6, 7

What could be easier?

It's hard to imagine a discipline that could be easier than giving thanks in every situation. How long does it take, after all, to say, "Thank You, Lord"?

Yet how many of us practice this discipline with the kind of regularity Paul calls for in 1 Thessalonians 5.18?

As easy as giving thanks might appear, it's apparently harder than it seems. But if we can keep God in mind more consistently throughout our day – our Creator, Keeper, and loving Savior – and practice giving thanks in various ways and as often as we think of it, we should find this discipline beginning to become more a normal part of our walk with and work for the Lord.

And as we improve in giving thanks, we'll be strengthening an important muscle in our souls that can aid us in improving *all* our affections, and in keeping our hearts with all diligence for an ever-stronger soul.

But in case we still need more incentive to give thanks, God holds out a most appealing promise.

What's in it for me?

God knows that we are, at heart, self-seeking creatures. And, as we have seen, a certain amount of self-love is perfectly in order. We might ask, What's in it for me? That's not necessarily a bad thing, if our desires are of the noblest sort. Even Jesus, the writer of Hebrews tells us, was able to endure the cross and despise the shame of it because of the joy that was set down before Him (Heb. 12.1, 2; cf. Ps. 22). He endured suffering and shame for the joy of satisfying the will of God, accomplishing His purpose in life, and securing the blessings of redemption and eternal life for all who believe in Him.

In the Scriptures, God consistently leads His people to follow and obey Him by holding out promises, expectations of goodness and blessing, which may be realized through obedience. Those blessings not only bring abundance and wellbeing to His people, but glory and honor to Him. Thus, whatever God promises can be regarded as a noble interest, one fully in line with proper self-love and which, while it satisfies a deep need and longing in our souls, at the same time achieves a larger, more transcendent purpose.

The command to give thanks in all circumstances is attended by just such a promise. Paul says that, if we will give thanks in *everything* – even those situations or circumstances that might otherwise lead us to feel anxious or distressed – the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Let's make a few observations about this "peace of God."

The peace of God

First, we confess that we cannot understand it, not completely. When God grants His peace to us, it invades our mind, pervades our heart, settles our conscience, and puts our body at ease and at rest. When we are resting in the peace of God, external circumstances and situations can neither disturb nor disrupt the overall sense of wellbeing that fills us with calm and delight. We don't know how this happens. That's because it is not a work of our minds or affections. It is the peace of *God*, and is wrought by His Spirit, according to His Word in a way that affects every single aspect of our lives with the assured sense that all is well.

This peace, in the second place is "in Christ Jesus." It is therefore accessible only by faith, only by believing

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that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven of sin, assured of eternal life, accompanied through all our journey in this world by His indwelling Spirit and unfailing Word, and bound for an eternal destiny of joyous rest and praise. We belong to Him, and He keeps us in the Father's love. He is with us always, even to the end of the age. Our lives are hidden with Him in God. Nothing that can happen to us in this life can change that circumstance; therefore, *nothing* in this life can deprive us of the joy, rest, and peace we may experience by giving thanks in everything.

A word of warning is appropriate here: This is not some “add-water-and-stir” formula for being at peace. The command here is not simply, when anxiousness begins to settle upon us, that we should fire up some prayer of thanks to God, and then we'll be at peace. Rather, this is a call to relentless faith – like Jacob, wrestling the angel – that perseveres in giving thanks and seeking the Lord and calling out to Him until, in His way and time, He grants the promised peace that settles all our souls.

That doesn't mean our peace will be free of trial or loss or even suffering. But what are these, except mere circumstances, sent by God, ruled by God, and triumphed *in* by us because of His peace at work within us?

God wants us to be at peace, and He has promised that we can know that *beyond-understanding* state of being if only we will turn to Him with thanksgiving and stay that course until He blesses.

For reflection

1. How would you describe the peace of God that is beyond understanding? How do you experience this peace?
2. Given the choice, do you think most people would prefer to live in anxiousness or in peace? Explain.
3. How does thanksgiving open the door to the peace of God?

Next steps – Transformation: What's troubling you at this moment? What is robbing you of your peace? Offer it up in thanksgiving to God, and keep wrestling with it until He grants you His promised peace.

5 The Practice of Thanksgiving (1)

I will freely sacrifice to You;

I will praise Your name, O LORD, for it is good. Psalm 54.6

What God requires

We have said that what God requires of us in thanksgiving is not, in the first instance, some disposition of our heart – a *feeling* of gratitude – but an *act* of obedient faith which acknowledges His sovereignty and love – giving thanks.

Moreover, He calls us to thanksgiving in *every* situation and in *every thing*. In other words, there is not a situation or circumstance in our lives which is not appropriate for giving thanks to God.

Thus, it is clear that God intends thanksgiving to be something closely associated with us, something, as it were, indistinguishable from us, a characteristic so intrinsic to who we are that people cannot think of us apart from it. Our text suggests that offering sacrifices of thanksgiving to God should be *spontaneous*, something that issues from us almost without thinking, and in every situation. I am reminded of Pigpen, the Peanuts character who kicks up a cloud of dust wherever he is – even in the midst of a snowstorm; just so, we are to “kick up” an aura or envelope of thanksgiving as a fundamental aspect of our being-in-the-world.

And let us bear in mind that the promise for doing this is peace that guards our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, and preserves in us a sense of wellbeing, come what may.

So how can we do this? How can we practice thanksgiving in such a way as to fulfill the guidelines of Scripture and know the rich promise of God?

The impetus for thanksgiving

I want to look at this in two contexts, first, that of our *individual calling* to give thanks. Then, in the next installment, we will consider how believers together can multiply thanksgiving by their example and encouragement to one another.

Thanksgiving such as God requires of us grows out of knowledge and awareness – the knowledge of God and awareness of the many blessings He brings our way each day. The starting point for thanksgiving, therefore, is in a vital relationship with God, nurtured and sustained each day by reading and meditation in Scripture and through prayer, and by noting the glory and Presence of God in the many gifts and blessings He provides each day.

We will not be likely to think of God much throughout the day, much less to give Him thanks, if we do not invest significant time and effort in knowing Him through Scripture and prayer. Are your Bible reading practices consistently yielding new insights and understandings into God and His love for you? Do you find that you are being drawn through His Word into the very Presence of His glory? Is prayer a time of enjoyable communion with God, or just another item on your list of things to do?

Unless these disciplines are in place, and constantly being improved, you will be unlikely to have the mindset or heartset for turning to God in thanksgiving.

As we grow in our relationship with God, we will find that He is on our minds more often throughout the day. Then we will notice all the many ways that He, in steadfast love and faithfulness, blesses us each day – food to eat, family and friends to love and enjoy, clothes to wear, freedom, health, work, transportation, a world full of beauty and wonder: all these are blessings from God, and each is meant both to benefit us as

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well as to induce us to give thanks to God. Thus, the more *mindful* we are of God and *observant* of His many blessings, the more we will be ready to give Him thanks in every situation.

But we will also remember that He is with us and providing for us even in adversity or trial, suffering or loss. And then we will be more likely to give thanks *for Him in* even such difficult times.

Pray, share, and sing

Such thanksgiving can come in prayer, of course, in which we simply express in words our gratitude to God for whatever we are observing, experiencing, or pondering in our hearts. Let such prayers be specific, and let them be detailed. Don't settle for saying simply, "Lord, I really just thank You for being so good." Specify the cause of your gratitude; explain in detail how this particular boon especially blesses you, or this trial stretches you; let one thing lead to another as you offer your prayers of thanksgiving to God. Take time in the car, as you're moving from one task to the next, or even in silent prayer while you are working, eating, or meeting with friends. Cultivate prayers of thanksgiving of various kinds for every situation, and see how the peace of God descends and fills you.

Talk to others about the goodness of God and the things in your life that cause you to give thanks. Doing so will have the additional benefit of encouraging others in this most practical affection as well. We'll have more to say about this in our next section.

You might also try singing your thanksgiving to the Lord, as the psalmist directs in Psalm 147.7. If you don't know any hymns of thanksgiving, learn some, or write one of your own, or simply break out into impromptu songs of thanks to God as you feel led – the Lord, you will recall, loves even a joyful noise.

Don't be content merely to think about giving thanks, or to give thanks only as part of your regular prayer time. Begin to practice thanksgiving throughout your day, and watch how God's peace envelops your every waking moment.

For reflection

1. What are some reasons you might *not* practice thanksgiving each day?
2. How can believers help one another in giving thanks more spontaneously?
3. What hymn or psalm of thanksgiving might you use to improve this discipline?

Next steps – Transformation: What is your "thanksgiving plan" for today? Think it through. Commit to it. Share it with some friends. Carry it out. Then review it before you retire at night.

6 The Practice of Thanksgiving (2)

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Psalm 111.1 (ESV)

Practice thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is the easiest and most practical of the affections of a well-kept heart. It is the will of God that His children should give thanks to Him in every circumstance. The Lord promises that, if we will practice thanksgiving, He will envelop us in His perfect peace. Practicing thanksgiving as an act of faith and obedience also strengthens and prepares the heart to practice all the other affections according to what God intends.

Nothing could be easier or more important than to give thanks in everything, and yet we find it such a struggle to do so with any degree of consistency.

This is why we need to practice thanksgiving more than we do, until giving thanks spontaneously becomes just who we are as those whose minds are fixed on the Lord, and who understand that all our blessings come from Him, even in the midst of adversity.

We've seen some ways that we can begin to practice thanksgiving more consistently in our personal lives – through prayer and singing, when we're alone and or with others, in general and specific terms. But Christians should make more of their times together for giving thanks. Christian fellowship and worship are natural settings in which to offer thanks to God.

But making the most of such times for thanksgiving won't happen unless we are intentional.

Some suggestions

The more we work as individuals at giving thanks throughout the day, the better prepared we will be to encourage one another in this work. As you anticipate coming together with other believers, consider ways you might stimulate others to the good work of giving thanks to God (Heb. 10.24). Plan how you will use thanksgiving to honor the Lord and encourage your fellow believers. The combined and multiplied thanksgiving of God's people reinforces and enlarges our individual gratitude, forming a chorus pleasing to God and beneficial to one another.

We want to give thanks in all things, and giving thanks with others can help us to improve in this most practical of affections. How can we make more of our times together for giving thanks?

First, as we have already mentioned, take time when you are with other Christians to share what God is doing in your life. You can do this by reporting on your time in His Word or your observations of His blessings. Share what the Lord is doing in your Personal Mission Field, your church, or in the Body of Christ in your community. All such indications of God at work can encourage your fellow believers in the knowledge of God and in more careful observance and acknowledgment of His blessings.

Be careful about boasting here in anything other than the Lord. Remember Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), and be on guard against any vaunting of self when you're offering your thanks to God.

You might also pray with thanksgiving with and for one another, for what God is doing or teaching in your lives. In a group of fellow believers, the prayers of others for us may serve to open our minds to blessings from God we've simply failed to notice. The same will be true of our thanksgiving prayers for them.

Sing hymns of thanksgiving together. Christians are not as faithful in singing as we should be, especially given the many commands to sing to the Lord which we find throughout the psalms, and the fact that singing to

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one another psalms and hymns and spiritual songs of thanksgiving is evidence of the filling of the Spirit in our lives (Eph. 5.18-21). We've seen that singing can be a powerful means for nurturing proper affections. Singing with thanksgiving only multiplies the potential for shaping our souls for spontaneous gratitude.

Read psalms of thanksgiving together, pausing after each verse to allow any who wish to do so to pray in their own words, following the suggestions of the text. By doing this you will train your soul to think in terms of thanksgiving, as you minister the living and powerful Word of God with one another. And you'll also train your mind to read Scripture with a view to giving thanks for the many promises and blessings revealed there.

Encourage one another in specific acts of thanksgiving. These might include giving special offerings, taking up a fast, serving in some ministry opportunity, or creating a song or poem to commemorate some particular act of God's goodness toward you. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, believers were led to remember God's goodness in special acts of thanksgiving – from Jacob's pillar, to the stones of witness in the book of Joshua, and the Lord's Supper. Outward communal acts of thanksgiving can help to reinforce this most practical affection in our souls.

In short, don't miss the opportunity, when you are gathered with other believers – including your family – to practice thanksgiving to the Lord. You can always find something for which to thank Him, and the more you do, the more you will train your heart for gratitude.

Thanksgiving – by all means!

By all these means, and many more, Christians can encourage and strengthen one another in giving thanks to God.

Urge your pastor to add prayers of thanksgiving to the morning worship. Insist in your Bible study group or Sunday school class that time be given for thanksgiving. Make the most of every opportunity, when you are together with other believers, to give thanks to God.

Remember, the goal is to give thanks in everything, for this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus. Thanksgiving leads to peace and a well-kept heart. And a well-kept heart is the key to a strong soul. The more we help one another in this, the more we will also help ourselves.

For reflection

1. What opportunities exist in your life for giving thanks together with other Christians? What can you do to make sure part of that time is devoted to thanksgiving?
2. Do you think spending more time together in thanksgiving would be a help to those whose faith is weak or faltering? Explain.
3. What steps can you take to encourage other believers to seek out opportunities for giving thanks?

Next steps: How can you bring more thanksgiving into your life at home? Make a plan to fill your home and your Christian groups with thanksgiving, then enlist others to help you carry out your plan.

7 Pathway to the Knowledge of God

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks... Romans 1.21 (ESV)

Two paths

We conclude this study on the heart of thanksgiving with the same passage of Scripture with which we began (only here, from the ESV rather than NKJV). Paul's teaching in this verse is foundational for understanding the times in which we live, and for knowing what we can and should do in such times (1 Chron. 12.32).

We saw that failing to acknowledge God and give Him thanks is the hinge on which unbelievers turn away from God and descend into His wrath, as He gives them up to deeper and deeper snares of sin and corruption. The failure to give thanks is the first step on the path to rebellion, drifting from God, and the inevitable consequences of a life of sin.

Since failing to give thanks marks the pathway to separation from God, can a more consistent practice of thanksgiving light the path to a deeper knowledge and love for the Lord?

I believe this is so, and the reasons for it should be obvious.

God and His blessing

First, we need to make the *desire to give thanks* a priority in our relationship with God. Set your mind and heart to give thanks, and call on the Lord to help you fulfill this discipline, until thanksgiving begins to be a more constant affection in your heart.

Since we can only grow in the practice of thanksgiving as we grow in our relationship with God, the *desire* to be obedient in giving thanks in all circumstances will lead us to spend more time with the Lord, meditating in His Word and seeking Him in prayer. Because we want to *do* the will of God in giving thanks, we will seek the *Presence* of God throughout the day, to fill our minds and hearts with Him, making us thus better prepared to give thanks in everything.

We can't "gin up" thanksgiving just because we want to; it must flow from within our minds and hearts – from our desires – where we faithfully nurture the knowledge of God and love for Him through the disciplines of Scripture and prayer.

Further, the more we practice thanksgiving, the more we will be aware of the blessings of God on every hand. The whole cosmos depends on the Word of God (Heb. 1.3), and that includes every moment and detail of our lives. He is manifesting His glory and power continuously (Ps. 19.1-4). As we reflect on the everyday blessings of God, our sense of His Presence and our understanding of His wisdom, power, beauty, goodness, and love will grow. The more these grow, the better we will know and love Him; the more we will discern His Presence, glory, and gifts; and the more inclined we will be to give Him thanks and praise, thus reinforcing what is becoming an *upward* spiral of growth in the knowledge of God.

Practice does not make perfect, as is said; rather, it makes permanent. The *practice* of thanksgiving throughout the day will make the *presence* of thanksgiving a more characteristic feature of our heart, leading to more giving of thanks and continuous growth in the knowledge of the Lord.

The more we learn of the Lord through thanksgiving, the more we will want to know of Him by every other means. All the disciplines whereby we grow in the knowledge of God – our daily devotions, public worship, reading and meditation, paying attention to creation, talking with other believers – will be strengthened and enlarged, so that we can gain greater access to His glory.

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God will draw us to Himself as we walk in obedience to His Word; when we seek Him with all our hearts, He will be found by us, and no small part of that seeking entails faithful obedience in giving thanks.

The power of thanksgiving

If you wish to know the will of God for your life, begin by giving thanks. If you wish to grow in the knowledge of God, which is eternal life (Jn. 17.3), persevere in giving thanks. If you want to keep your heart with all diligence and train your soul for continuous growth in Christlikeness, give thanks in everything; for this discipline will teach the other affections, thoughts, and priorities of your soul how to keep their proper place before the Lord.

Thanksgiving is the solution for spiritual confusion, anxiousness of soul, and uncertainty of direction in life. Thanksgiving enlarges our souls, enriches our daily experience, and extends the grace and goodness of God to fellow members of the believing community. Because it sets us in the very Presence of God, thanksgiving dissolves our fears, leads to joy and rejoicing, and engulfs us in the peace of God.

Is it possible that a lack of thanksgiving, or a lackadaisical attitude toward this most practical affection, is keeping you from a more fulfilling experience of Jesus Christ? A more joyful and peaceful walk with the Lord? Greater faithfulness in seeking Him? Indeed, it may well be.

Thanksgiving is the solution to a multitude of spiritual ills, but we must be willing to take the medicine. Do not wait to feel thankful before you start practicing thanksgiving as a way of life. And don't wait to be invited to give thanks; let thanksgiving rise from you naturally, sweetly, specifically, and consistently at every opportunity, in every situation.

Your Christian life will be dramatically transformed if you will take Paul's simple exhortation to heart: "in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5.18). Let your heart be filled with the heart of thanksgiving, and you will know the Lord, and love Him and serve Him more joyfully and faithfully every day.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to know God? What does it mean to grow in the knowledge of God? In what sense are the knowledge of God and eternal life one and the same?
2. How does following the path of thanksgiving help to keep us off the path of drifting from the Lord?
3. What can keep you from becoming a person who gives thanks to God with greater consistency and joy?

Next steps – Transformation: What will you do to begin practicing thanksgiving more consistently throughout the day?

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why do we say that thanksgiving is the most practical affection?
2. What happens to people who fail to give thanks to God? Why does this happen?
3. To what can thanksgiving lead in your life?
4. How does giving thanks relate to increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3.18)?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study for keeping your heart with all diligence? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.