

GIVING THANKS FOR GOSPEL GROWTH

Introduction: What Do You Most Often Thank God For?

When you pray, what do you most often thank God for? One author I was reading this week pointed out that what we thank God for most often is likely what we value most highly.¹ Think about that for a moment. What do you most often thank God for? For those of you who are parents, what you thank God for most often when you pray with your kids is what you are teaching your kids to value most highly. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:4 that we should receive everything with thanksgiving so I am not saying that we should thank God for some things and not others. But what things should we be looking for and thanking God for most often? What should we prioritize in our prayers of thanks? In Colossians 1:3–4 Paul shows us what we should value and give thanks for. Then in verses 5–8, he tells us how we can get more of it. So we will attempt to answer two questions this morning:

1. What should we give thanks for?
2. How do we get more of it?

What Should We Give Thanks For?

So what should we give thanks for? What should we prioritize when we pray and thank God? Look at verse 3. Paul says, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you.” Every time he prays for them, he gives thanks to God for them. So what is it about them that he gives thanks for? What is so important and amazing to Paul that he gives thanks for it every time he prays?

Look at verse 4. It begins with “since.” The NIV translates it a little bit stronger by using the word “because.” Because what? Because they heard of the Colossians (1) faith in Christ Jesus and (2) of the love that they have for all the saints.

Now we shouldn't think of these two things as completely separate as if you can have one without the other. Let me give you an illustration: Imagine my son, Henri, climbs up onto something very high and is about to jump off of it. (This isn't as hypothetical as you would think). As he is about to jump, I yell “Stop!” He stops and I explain to him that he is up too high and if he jumps, he is going to hurt himself. Then, (this is the hypothetical part) he backs away from the edge, climbs down, and comes over to me. Now when he walks over to me I will probably give him a big hug and say something like “thank you for trusting me and obeying me.” Now could he trust me without obeying me? No. He expressed his trust by obeying me. That is how faith and love work. There is no such thing as a person who has faith in Jesus Christ but does not have love for all the saints. As the book of James would say, “faith apart from works is

¹ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1992), 41.

dead” (Jas 2:26). And as Paul says in Galatians 5, faith works through love. That is why in verse 8 Paul only mentions love. True genuine love is the fruit of faith in Christ Jesus. So Paul is saying here, “you believed in Christ Jesus and that faith is the real thing because it is producing love for all the saints.”

This love isn’t Midwest nice obligation and it is not just a feeling. It bears with one another when we are difficult to get along with. It refuses to gossip about others even when they wrong you. It mourns with those who are suffering. It gets on its knees to pray for others regularly. It is the kind of love that would be impossible without faith in Christ Jesus. It is supernatural Holy Spirit created love. And that is why Paul always gives thanks to God for it.

Application: How to Give Thanks Like Paul

How do we do this? What are some ways that we can make this kind of thankfulness a part of our lives? I’ll give you four ways we can apply these verses:

Value What Paul Values

Paul values the powerful work of God in his people. This is his priority when he prays and gives thanks to God. He is constantly looking for signs of God’s grace in the lives of other believers and rejoicing when he sees them. Imitate Paul by looking for signs of God’s grace in believers around you and giving thanks for them. Make this a natural habit in your life.

Pray With Your Bible Open

One of the ways we can learn to pray like Paul is to pray with Paul’s prayers. This is what I normally do when I pray. I use Paul’s prayers as a guide for my own prayers. This will keep you from getting in a rut when you are praying. It will keep you from running out of things to pray for. And you will learn how to pray in ways that are biblical.

Pray With Your Member Directory Open

This is one of the things that I appreciated about Jim. He regularly prayed through the member directory. If you prayed for one page each day you would pray for everyone in the directory twice in a month. Ideally, you could pray with your Bible in one hand and your member directory in the other.

When You Thank God for Someone, Tell Them

Now that may sound weird or awkward. But it wasn’t weird for Paul because he did it all the time. Maybe the real reason why it is weird to us is because we rarely ever do it. Paul doesn’t just thank God for these believers, he tells them that he thanks God for them. And he tells them why he thanks God for them.

How Do We Get More of It?

Now Paul doesn’t stop here. He doesn’t just tell them what he is giving thanks for, he tells them where it came from. Paul wants them to *continue* in their faith and love so he reminds of the cause of their faith and love. Look at verse 5. What was it that transformed them into Jesus-trusting, saint-loving people? The hope laid up for them in heaven. And where did they hear about this hope? In the gospel; the good news that God, in love, sent his only son to suffer and die for you. And by his death, he reconciled you to God. He defeated sin and death. He secured every blessing for you; he secured an inheritance that is, in the words of Peter, “Imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” And when you believe in Jesus, this

inheritance is yours fully, completely, and without strings attached. When you truly believe and put your trust in Jesus, that faith unites you to him and all that he has is yours. Every benefit of the gospel becomes yours. Knowing this truth and delighting in it is what changed the Colossian Christians so that they began to show love for all the saints. *God changes us and makes us more loving as we know and delight in all that he has secured for us through the death and resurrection of his son.*

Hope Causes Love

Example: Hebrews 10:32–35

Let me give you just one of many examples of this in the Bible. Listen to Hebrews 10:32–35:

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. (Hebrews 10:32-34 ESV)

These Christians were able to love and stand beside their brothers and sisters when they were thrown into prison and when they were persecuted. They were able to love their brothers and sisters in Christ even when it meant suffering because they knew that they had a better possession; a hope stored up for them in heaven. They were so grounded in the gospel that they were able to joyfully accept the loss of all their earthly possessions.

Hope Applied

Let me give you just one way to apply this. One struggle I have when it comes to loving other people is when they don't appreciate it at all. How do you continue to love someone when they don't ever say thank you and they don't recognize your sacrifice for them? You remind yourself of the hope stored up for you in heaven. And bring to mind a passage like Colossians 3:23–24, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” When that truth begins to sink in, it will change you and sustain your love in difficult relationships.

2 Proofs of the Gospel's Power to Give Life

Now in case you are not convinced of this, Paul gives two proofs to show the gospel's power to increase faith and love. Look at verse 6.

Proof 1: The Gospel Is Giving Life All Over the World

First proof: The gospel is doing this all over the world. We often tend to think that churches grow and bear fruit because of things like great programs, or very gifted senior pastors, or maybe just because they are bigger. But if you put all of the healthy churches all around the world together there really is only one thing that they will share in common: they are centered around the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church structure may be different, the culture may be different, the language may be different, but the gospel message is the same. The same gospel that is producing fruit in Asia and Africa and South America is the same gospel that we have.

Proof 2: The Gospel Gave You Life

Now look at the last half of verse 6 through verse 8, Paul gives the second proof for the power of the gospel: the experience of the Colossian believers. From the first day they heard and truly understood the grace of God in the gospel, it produced faith and love in them.

When you became a Christian, it was the grace of God in Jesus that changed you. It humbled you. It gave you great joy. It set you free from your sin. It changed you from a self-serving person to an others-loving person. And that same gospel is what will continue to change you, grow you, and produce fruit in your life.

The Gospel Causes Growth

Now look at the language Paul uses in verse 6: “Growing” and “Bearing fruit.” Paul wants us to think of our spiritual lives and the life of our church like a plant and the gospel as what causes it to grow and bear fruit. If we neglect the gospel or change the gospel, our growth will be stunted. If we continue to focus on the gospel and delight in the hope of the gospel, we will grow and bear fruit.

And this growth isn’t optional. It’s not as if some Christians grow and others are content to stay where they are and that’s ok. Listen to Paul in verses 21–23 of this same chapter:

²¹And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:21-23 ESV)

If we neglect or forsake the gospel, we will not persevere to the end. Paul wants us to persevere. He wants us to be stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel.

Concluding Summary

What should we give thanks for? The faith and love that the gospel produces in other believers.
How do we get more faith and love? By knowing and delighting in the hope of the gospel.

Conclusion: The Hope of the Gospel

So what is this “hope” of the gospel that is stored up for you in heaven? Here are just a few of the promises about this hope that we find in scripture:

- We will see Jesus in all his glory
 - ¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹²training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, (Titus 2:11-13 ESV)
- We will become like Jesus when we see him
 - ²Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2 ESV)
- We will have new glorified bodies that do not suffer from cancer, pain, allergies, disabilities, age, sickness, or anything else.

- ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:20-21 ESV)
- Jesus will raise all believers from the dead.
 - ¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 ESV)
- We will enjoy a new heaven and a new earth where death, sorrow, and pain are no more and where we will joyfully discover the glories of our great God and king, Jesus for all eternity.
 - ¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4 ESV)

Prayer

Father, thank you for the gospel and the growth and fruit that it has produced in this church. Teach us to give thanks for the faith and love that we see in each other and remind us of the hope stored up for us in heaven.