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CHAPTER 1

GRATITUDE'S BLUEPRINT

When people think of thanksgiving, they likely think of Pilgrims, not prayer; drumsticks, not doctrine. Even the holiday of Thanksgiving gets minimized and skipped over. Black Friday has taken over Thanksgiving Day for many people. The morning started with gratitude for what we have, but by evening, we're thinking about what we want next. In our day and age of more-more-more, where "Thanksgiving" is the waiting season between Halloween and Christmas, gratitude takes a back seat. It's no surprise it struggles to compete for attention with a holiday where I get to make a list of things people will buy me.

It's easy to blame the world, but I'll admit my guilt. I know God is the source of everything in my life. That doesn't mean thanksgiving makes it into my day-to-day rhythms like it should. I take gifts for granted and ignore His work on my behalf. When I don't get what I want, I complain and feel cheated. I'm quick to gripe and groan.

To fight our inclination toward grumbling, we need gratitude.

While we talk to God a lot about what we want, we also must give thanks to God for who He is and what He's done. We not only say "please" in our prayers but we also say "thank You."

As the psalmist says, "It is good to give thanks to the LORD" (Ps. 92:1). Not only is it right to give thanks, but it's *good* to do so. It's good because it glorifies God and bolsters our faith. It confesses everything we have ultimately comes from God (1 Cor. 4:7). It's good because it chooses joy over discontentment. We trust God in His wisdom and kindness for what He gives and allows (Phil. 4:4–13). And it's good because giving thanks opens a door to greater intimacy with God (Pss. 31:7; 100:4–5).

Are you interested in these things: more joy, less discontentment and envy, and a deeper walk with God? Keep reading to learn how gratitude opens a door welcoming them into our life.

While commending thanksgiving, I also want to caution us. Many books and articles equate thanksgiving with naming blessings. The focus becomes goodies rather than God. "I'm thankful for family. I'm thankful for church. I'm thankful for pumpkin pie and all its various spin-offs." I'm not the thanksgiving police here to slap anyone on the wrist, but I'd like to move from being thankful for stuff to also (and especially) being thankful to God. The object of our gratitude needs to expand from *something* to *someone*.

Acknowledging God's gifts is a great place to start. But we can't reduce giving thanks to identifying blessings. Biblical thanksgiving involves recognizing reasons to give thanks and then expressing gratitude to God for them. As we consider what He's done or who He is, we find joy in Him. In this opening

chapter, I want to summarize these four features or steps of biblical thanksgiving. They will become the major focus of chapters 4 to 7.

1. Thankful
2. Thankful to God
3. Thankfulness to God expressed
4. Thankfulness to God leading to joy in God

I'm not suggesting you mechanically move from "step 1" to "step 2." They all go together. Over time, they'll happen at once more naturally. Like you might do with a toy or piece of equipment, we'll take thanksgiving apart and put its pieces on the table to understand how it works. Unlike when I assemble things at home, everything should fit back together without any unexplainable parts left over.

THANKFUL

Thanksgiving is more than a quick nod of the cap for the good stuff in our life. It's not a spiritual contract where God blesses us and we hold up our end of the deal by acknowledging Him. It should be motivated by grace and gratitude, not guilt or greed.

We often relate to God like we do with relatives at Christmas. Saying thank you is the right thing to do, so we do it. As a teenager, my grandma would buy me sweaters I could never wear in public. (It was almost as if she gave laughable white elephant gifts before that was even a thing.) They weren't close to what

I wanted, but she loved me. I knew the respectful thing to do was say thanks. And selfishly, I wanted to ensure I'd get a gift for my upcoming birthday (hopefully cash this time). I know, it's not very deep. But that's often how we view giving God thanks.

We realize we need to do it more often, but our shallow grasp of what it's about keeps it from becoming a meaningful part of our Christian walk.

Thanksgiving should be motivated by grace and gratitude, not guilt or greed.

As chapter 4 explores, we lack gratitude because we're unaware of the mercies and gifts surrounding us. If we never take the first step of experiencing gratitude through seeing what we have to be thank-

ful for, we'll never give thanks. We'll then lose out on joy and communion with God. Thanksgiving starts by not taking the gifts, provision, and blessings for granted. But feeling thankful leads us somewhere.

THANKFUL TO GOD

It's easy to stop at stuff I'm glad to have or people I appreciate, but there's a lot more to thanksgiving.*

If the first step is being thankful for *something*, in the second step we realize there's *someone* to thank. The Bible never speaks

* Another problem with this approach is it makes no room for giving thanks in all circumstances, including the things we don't have that we want or the hard things we've had to walk through that we didn't want. If thanksgiving is only about the goodies and great moments, then thankfulness is narrowly restricted to tangible blessings—as we define them. See more in chapter 9, "Gritty Gratitude: Giving Thanks in All Circumstances."

of thankfulness in general. It always points to a person. Cornelius Plantinga writes, “It must be an odd feeling to be thankful to nobody in particular. Christians in public institutions often see this odd thing happening on Thanksgiving Day. Everyone in the institution seems to be thankful ‘in general.’ It’s very strange. It’s a little like being married in general.”¹

If on Christmas morning I’m grateful for an eagerly opened gift, I should be thankful to a person. Someone shelled out the cash to buy it. They sacrificed time in browsing online to find it or dared to enter the madhouse of a store during December. They worked to make money, which they could have used on themselves, and they spent it on me. I wouldn’t have the gift apart from their thoughtful, personal, and sacrificial act. I’m thankful *for* something but I’m thankful *to* someone.

THANKFULNESS TO GOD EXPRESSED

Thanks isn’t merely experienced; it’s expressed. Tim Keller writes, “It’s one thing to be grateful. It’s another to give thanks. Gratitude is what you feel. Thanksgiving is what you do.”² If we’re thankful to someone, we thank them. We say thanks in various ways (spoken, sung, written, through an offering, lived out), but it needs to be communicated.

“Oh *give thanks to the LORD*, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! *Let the redeemed of the LORD say so*, whom he has redeemed from trouble” (Ps. 107:1–2, emphasis added). Don’t just feel it; say it. As we respond to God’s goodness and grace by giving thanks, it pushes out resentment, envy, anger,

and complaining. Thanksgiving power-washes away the sinful residues of ingratitude. In its place, the joy of rejoicing in God settles into our hearts.

Give thanks.

THANKFULNESS TO GOD LEADING TO JOY IN GOD

Let's say you feel thankful, you recognize there's a person to thank, and you express thanks. If you're there, that's a great place to be and I don't want to suggest you're doing it wrong. What I want to propose is that there's even more to thanksgiving. Not the burden of more to do, but the joy of more to experience. Where thanksgiving really comes to life is this next part.

Don't miss this. I'm not just saying the giver is more important than the gift. I'm saying the gift tells me something about the giver. The more thoughtful or more personal the gift, the more meaningful it will be. And the more meaningful it is, the more I'll appreciate them because of it. It brings us a little closer together. It tells me about them and our relationship strengthens.

I think this final step is the secret sauce of biblical thanksgiving. It causes it to pop. It flavors and elevates thanksgiving in a powerful and personal way. When giving thanks leads to knowing God and, therefore, greater joy in God, it changes us. Thanksgiving is no longer only something we do but it does something to us. If we can get to a place where we realize thanksgiving points us to a person, it can then deepen our relationship with that person.

Returning to my Christmas illustration, the unwrapped gift reveals something about the person who gave it. If my wife gives me a gift card, I won't complain because gift cards can be useful. But as much as I appreciate a gift card, if my *wife* gives me one, it might suggest a lack of thoughtfulness or sacrificial love. But if she purchased a book on my wish list, or gave me a gift card to a specific restaurant I love, I would be more thankful because she picked something with me in mind.

In this scenario, I'm thankful for the gift itself, but the gift showed me specific things about my wife. It revealed her thoughtfulness, kindness, selflessness, and love for me in getting me something I desired, even though it required more time and energy from her. As I recognize this and thank her for it, receiving a gift and expressing thanks becomes a unifying relational act.

This proves true for thanksgiving to God. As we give thanks to God for gifts—which we can truly enjoy—we should also look *through* the gift to learn more about the one who gave it.³ In doing so, we enjoy and love the Giver even more. John Piper writes, “We are able to see every gift as a beam from the sun of God’s glory. Every joy in the beam runs up to the foundation of light and ends there. No created thing becomes a rival but only a revelation of God.”⁴

Gratitude gives us pause to ask questions like: What does the nature of this gift tell me about the giver? What does it tell me about what they want for me or how they're seeking my good? How does what someone did for me provide insight into their heart, character, intentions, and attributes?

David Pao contends that thanksgiving isn't merely a polite

THE GRUMBLER'S GUIDE TO GIVING THANKS

and proper moral act. “Thanksgiving in Paul is an act of worship. It is not focused primarily on the benefits received or the blessed condition of a person; instead, God is the centre of thanksgiving.”⁵ In the Bible, when people give thanks to God, they do so with one eye on the gift and the other eye on the Giver known through the gift.

As we take this step into thanksgiving, it builds our trust in God. Here our fears, anxiety, and worries get smaller as our view of God gets bigger. This doesn't happen because problems go away but because we've encountered a God who is in all circumstances still good, in control, at work, providing for us, and acting on our behalf. Giving thanks fans into flame our faith while pouring water on the coals of our fears and temptations. We rest in and lean on the God at the center of our praise.

Through giving thanks to God, we gain love for God, trust in God, and joy from God.

EXAMPLES OF THANKSGIVING IN THE BIBLE

This kind of God-centered, worship-filled thanksgiving pervades the Psalms (such as Psalms 9, 30, 100, 103, 136, 138, and 145). In Psalm 103, David begins by blessing God for specific actions on behalf of His people (1–5).

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

who forgives all your iniquity,
 who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
 who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

As David continues, God's acts reveal His attributes and His heart. He doesn't move past thanksgiving but piles on reasons for gratitude.

The LORD works righteousness
 and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
 his acts to the people of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide,
 nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father shows compassion to his children,
 so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
For he knows our frame;
 he remembers that we are dust. (103:6–14)

David thanks God for His actions but also for how those actions reveal a God who is righteous and just (v. 6), merciful and gracious (v. 8), unswerving in love (v. 8), compassionate (v. 10), and understanding of our weaknesses (v. 14).

We also find this in Paul's thanksgiving prayers (Col. 1:3; Eph. 1:16; 2 Thess. 2:13–14). He moves from giving thanks to the God-centered motivation behind it: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:3–6). Paul blesses God for the work He's done in them, and rests in the God faithful to finish what He starts.

There's a deep theology of God under every statement of thanksgiving to God.

For our third example, consider the story of Jesus healing ten lepers in Luke 17:11–19. There's one man in particular who not only praises "God with a loud voice" (17:15), but he also falls "on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks" (17:16). The grateful Samaritan sees Jesus as his Healer, Deliverer, and Savior. Thanksgiving responds to a person. The joy isn't only in what he received from Jesus, but also in what he discovered about Jesus. He finds more than healing; he finds Christ.

When we give thanks, we acknowledge something to be from the Lord and we adore Him through it. There's *acknowledgment* of a gift as well as being *affected* by it.

GROWING IN GRATITUDE

As you seek to grow in thanksgiving, recognize God as the source of anything you're grateful for, and reflect on what these gifts tell you about Him. Thanksgiving moves from realizing what God has done to revering Him as a God who does such things. It's good to give thanks to God for His provision. It's even better to see God's generous heart towards His children. It's good to give thanks to God for the spiritual blessing of adoption in Christ. But it's even better to delight in the God who clears our charges and embraces us in His loving arms.

Become more aware of God's work in and around you, and get to know Him through those works. Let thankfulness lead to a closer friendship, heartfelt worship, and heightened trust.

As you read this book, each chapter unpacks the Bible's teaching on thanksgiving and suggests ways to practice it. You'll hopefully be convinced about how significant giving thanks is for your everyday walk with Christ and your everyday struggles against temptation and sin. Practicing thanksgiving will push you nearer to the heart of God, the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

Knowing and loving God is the ultimate goal. If you read this and can list off blessings all day long, but they don't inch your heart closer to God, then it's incomplete. If your perspective changes and you can turn lemons into lemonade with the best of them, but you can't turn gifts into gratitude, then something hasn't clicked. Thanksgiving aims to get our eyes on God. To redirect our heart from grumbling to gratitude, we must know the Giver of every good gift.

Putting It into Practice

GRAB A PEN, PENCIL, OR HIGHLIGHTER

Mark the places in your Bible where you see thanksgiving, gratitude, praise, or anything connected to giving thanks to God. Underline, circle, or highlight things you see about God you can thank Him for. Read Scripture with eyes open to notice thanksgiving and reflect on what it teaches. Take the Gratitude Challenge (see the appendix) for a daily reading of thanksgiving passages and respond in gratitude.

START A JOURNAL

Whether it's with electronic notes, a journal, random pieces of paper, a Post-it note, ink on a sweaty hand, or any other way you can write things down, keep a "gratitude list." Record reasons to give thanks, including things you see in the Bible, attributes of God, blessings in your life, ways God is at work, His mercies, ways He's strengthening you or sustaining you in trials, or any other reasons you can give thanks.