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CHAPTER ONE

The Power of Gratitude

*Seek to cultivate a buoyant, joyous sense
of the crowded kindnesses of God in your daily life.*

ALEXANDER MACLAREN¹

Thank you!

Those words were probably among the first you ever learned to say.

As I've been working on this book, a young family has been living in my home for an extended period, while working on their first home, a fixer-upper. Their little girl is currently seventeen months old and is just beginning to say words that are (almost) intelligible. (As she and I were "reading" a Winnie the Pooh book the other night, she said "Tigger" for the first time. It was quite the moment for "Aunt Nancy" and for her parents who witnessed the event.)

When Katelynn was less than a year old, her mom and dad started trying to train her to say "Please" and "Thank you." Although she can't quite say the words yet, she is getting the concept and has

become quite proficient with the hand signals they've taught her to use to communicate "Please" and "Thanks."

In virtually every language, "thank you" is part of Vocabulary 101. Except for those who are hearing or verbally impaired, it's not difficult to vocalize. But there's a world of difference between being able to *say* "thank you"—and actually having a thankful heart.

Where does gratitude rank on your list of Christian virtues?

In an arsenal that's supposed to include things like mountain-moving faith, radical obedience, patient long-suffering, and second-mile self-denial, for many, *gratitude* feels like an optional add-on. Nice if you can get it, but not all that critical to making life run the way it should.

If in our mind there's an A, B, and C tier of Christian character traits, gratitude likely rattles down to one of those lower rungs—down there with hospitality and cheerfulness and going to church on Sunday night. Gratitude may appear on the deluxe models, but it's definitely not in the basic package—and not even in the same *category* as those other, more important pieces of heavy Christian machinery. We think.

And yet . . .

This issue of gratitude is far more significant than its lightweight reputation would suggest. What appears at first to be a cute little cameo to go with our finer things is in reality a much weightier, much more powerful, much more necessary component to our Christian life.

Try, for example, to sustain persevering faith—without gratitude—and your faith will eventually forget the whole point of its faithfulness, hardening into a practice of religion that's hollow and ineffective.

Try being a person who exudes and exhibits Christian love

—without gratitude—and over time your love will crash hard on the sharp rocks of disappointment and disillusionment.

Try being a person who sacrificially gives of yourself—without the offering being accompanied by gratitude—and you’ll find every ounce of joy drained dry by a martyr complex.

As British pastor John Henry Jowett once said, “Every virtue divorced from thankfulness is maimed and limps along the spiritual road.”

True gratitude
is not an
incidental ingredient

True gratitude is not an incidental ingredient. Nor is it a stand-alone product, something that never actually intersects with life, safely denying reality out on its own little happy island somewhere. No, gratitude has a big job to do in us and in our hearts. And it is one of the chief ways that God infuses joy and resilience into the daily struggle of life.

WORSHIP OR WHINE

The importance of this matter of gratitude can hardly be overstated. I’ve come to believe that few things are more becoming in a child of God than a grateful spirit. By the same token, there is probably nothing that makes a person more *unattractive* than the absence of a grateful spirit.

I have learned that in every circumstance that comes my way, I can choose to respond in one of two ways:

I can *whine*

—or—

I can *worship!*

And I can’t worship without giving thanks. It just isn’t possible.

When we choose the pathway of worship and giving thanks, espe-

cially in the midst of difficult circumstances, there is a fragrance, a radiance, that issues forth out of our lives to bless the Lord and others.

On the other hand, when we give in to whining, murmuring, and complaining, we end up on a destructive slide that ultimately leads to bitterness and broken relationships.

The consequences of an ungrateful spirit are not as readily seen as, say, those of a contagious disease. But they are no less deadly. Western civilization has fallen prey to an epidemic of ingratitude. Like a poisonous vapor, this subtle sin is polluting our lives, our homes, our churches, and our culture.

A grateful man or woman will be a breath of fresh air in a world contaminated by bitterness and discontentment. And the person whose gratitude is a byproduct of and a response to the redeeming grace of God will showcase the heart of the gospel in a way that is winsome and compelling.

So unless you just love the way duty feels when it wakes you up at three in the morning, or hijacks your plans for your day off, or hands you an unexpected bill that wasn't in the budget this month, don't try living the Christian life without gratitude. By sheer willpower and effort, you may succeed at "gutting out" right responses, but your Christianity (so-called) will be hollow, hard-edged, and uninviting to others.

THE POWER OF GRATITUDE

When real estate developer Peter Cummings first assumed his position as chairman of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 1998, he began writing personal thank-you notes to any donor who contributed \$500 or more to the orchestra. He couldn't bear the thought of a symphony patron receiving a form letter with their

name accidentally misspelled, or one of his friends being generically thanked above Peter's stamped signature.

Among the many notes that went out under his hand was one addressed to Mary Webber Parker, daughter of one of Detroit's leading families from an earlier generation, an heiress to the Hudson's department store fortune. She had moved away from Detroit nearly a lifetime ago, settled in California, and was now widowed, residing in an upscale nursing home outside of Hartford, Connecticut.

And for some reason, she had decided to send a one-time check of \$50,000 to her hometown symphony.

Peter's letter to Mary was, as usual, prompt and gracious . . . and unexpected. It must have thrilled the heart of this elderly widow (who had been back to Detroit only twice in the past twenty years) to hear of the orchestra's revitalization, made possible in part by her generous contribution.

Two weeks later, she wrote pledging another \$50,000.

Within days, Peter had written her again, expressing his delighted gratitude and offering to come over from Michigan to visit with her sometime. He would be nearby when he took his daughter to register for college in Hartford the coming fall. He made no appeal for putting Mrs. Parker on the annual giving campaign—no “ask,” as they say in fund-raising circles. Just a kind, personal attempt to say *thank you*.

Months passed. Then, in a letter dated June 13, Mary Webber Parker accepted Peter's request to come visit her in the fall. And if he wouldn't mind, she would like to give, not \$50,000, but *\$500,000* to the Detroit symphony.

Not once, but once a year—for five years.²

Two and a half million dollars!

Not out of duty. Not out of coercion. Not because she didn't have

plenty of other suitors who would have bent over backwards to lure her as a benefactor.

She did it because someone was thankful. Genuinely thankful.

That's the effervescent power of gratitude—the power to freshen the stale air of everyday life.

OUR HEART'S DESIRE

Still, it would surprise me to think that you woke up this morning saying, “My, if I could just be a more thankful person, my life would be so much better.” Lack of gratitude rarely presents itself as a source of our problems.

Yet *I wouldn't* be surprised if you've been thinking to yourself lately, “I'm tired of my husband being so inconsiderate of me. I work nonstop to be sure his needs are met, and he gives me so little back in return. I wish just once he would stop and realize that there are other people besides him in this house who have needs.”

Or perhaps, “I've given my parents every opportunity to apologize for putting me in a situation where I was abused as a child. A simple ‘I'm sorry’ would help. But all I ever get are excuses and rationalizations, always passing the blame onto someone else. I just want them to care. I want them to acknowledge how hard this has been to live with and how much it has cost me. Why can't they see that?”

Or, “Honestly, I'm not sure I even know what I believe anymore. I've lost all desire to pray, or read the Bible, or serve the Lord in any of the ways I used to. It just doesn't do it for me anymore. Going to church is a chore. All that spiritual zeal I used to have—people must have thought I was crazy. Maybe I was. I think everybody would be a whole lot better off if they just didn't let God get their hopes up.”

I don't have to tell you that life hurts. If it's not one of these few

examples I've given, it's a difficult child, a frustrating job, a serious (or perhaps just suspicious) medical issue, an in-law impasse. It could be a bad credit rating, a sleep problem, a lingering sin habit, maybe something as life-altering as a long, drawn-out divorce.

Big. Small. Long-term. Everyday. There are so many things about our individual life experiences that occupy our thoughts, feed our fears, and add to our worries. Whether we're out driving somewhere, or trying to sneak a nap, or attempting to pay attention to the pastor's sermon, all this "yuck" hangs on us like a spider web we can't seem to brush off.

We try everything we can think of to deal with it. We build our cases against the people who cause us the most grief in life. We seek out the supportive shoulders that are offered to let us air our complaints and annoyances.

Sometimes we sink into escape patterns, just trying not to think about it. We pour ourselves into our work in an attempt to avoid dealing with more important things.

But most likely, no matter how we try to cope with difficulty and disappointment, underneath it all is the heart's cry that keeps so many of us from experiencing God's best in our situations. With the promises of God still in force—even in the midst of aching pain and struggle—with His peace and presence still available to those who rely on Him, we too often choose to find our solace in these two plaintive words: "Why me?"

How often have you clung to this tart complaint, hoping to draw from it enough strength to protect your heart from further danger and damage?

"Why is life so hard?"

"Why can't other people just be normal?"

"Why did this have to happen to me?"

“Why won’t anybody love me for who I am?”

“Why isn’t God answering my prayers?”

“Why do I have to live alone like this?”

“Why doesn’t the Bible work for me like it does them?”

“Why does this problem never seem to end?”

“Why am I supposed to just accept this?”

“Why me?”

Feeling betrayed. Feeling left out. Feeling inferior . . . mistreated . . . underappreciated. Like a whirlpool spinning around in never-ending circles, tugging and draining and pulling us down with every sweep of self-pity, we sink lower and lower into ourselves, into our problems.

Away from God.

Ungrateful.

“People tell me to keep my head up. They tell me this will only last for a season. But this ‘season’ of life has gone on for so long. And I still don’t see any end in sight.”

“You tell me to be thankful, Nancy. But you’ve never been in my shoes. If you had any idea what I’ve been through, you wouldn’t be so quick to say that.”

“I’m trying to accept what’s happening, I’m learning to live with it. But gratitude? Are you saying I’m supposed to *like* being here?”

I promise you, dear friend, if all I had to share with you were some sweet platitudes about thankfulness, I wouldn’t even try to respond to real-life statements like these. If all our faith had to offer were words that only fit in a church service or a theological textbook, it would be unkind of me to extend them to someone who is struggling to survive.

But true, Christ-centered, grace-motivated gratitude fits everywhere, even in life’s most desperate moments and difficult

situations. Even when there are no “answers,” it gives hope. It transforms overwhelmed strugglers into triumphant conquerors.

THE GREATER PART OF GRATITUDE

The concept of gratitude is not entirely missing from our world. Just walk through a Hallmark store in the mall. You’ll see lots of products on the shelves, decorated with daisies and pastel colors, encouraging us to think thankful thoughts. Their messages are inspiring, and I can appreciate the lightness and refreshment they offer in the midst of life’s many challenges.

Gratitude is a lifestyle.
*A hard-fought,
grace-infused,
biblical lifestyle.*

But somehow, most of these expressions of gratitude seem more at home at a tea party than in the tumble and turmoil of a life that you and I know all too well.

You see, gratitude is a lot more than jonquils and journaling pages.

Gratitude is a lifestyle. A hard-fought, grace-infused, biblical lifestyle. And though there’s a sense in which anyone can be thankful—for God has extended His common grace to all—the true glory and the transforming power of gratitude are reserved for those who know and acknowledge the Giver of every good gift and who are recipients of His redeeming grace.

This book is about discovering what makes gratitude truly Christian. And how it makes life, even with all its bumps and bruises, a joy to behold.



The starting place for that discovery is coming to grips with two realities that at first blush seem to be anything but cause for thanks: human rebellion . . . and the execution of an innocent Man.