

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Attitude of Gratitude

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When I was a kid, one of my early memories is playing a game called 'hide the thimble'. My grandparents lived in an old house with lots of nooks and crannies and my grandma would hide one of her sewing thimbles. Now, it's pretty small about the size of the tip of the index finger and the grand-kids would search all over the house trying to find that thimble. This is what we did before video games. Here's how it worked. If we were getting further and further away from the thimble, my grandma would say, you're getting colder, colder. If we were getting closer and closer, she would say, you're getting warmer, warmer, and when we were about to find it, right on top of it, could almost touch it my grandma would raise the pitch of her voice a little bit and say, you're getting hotter, hotter. I want you to hold that thought.

One of my favorite authors, Aiden Wilson Tozer said something that we cite quite frequently around here. He said, "What comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you." I think he's right, but here's the challenge. In the beginning, God created us in his image we have been creating God in our image ever since. And when we project our inclinations, our imperfections, our idiosyncrasies onto God, what we end up with is a god lowercase g who looks a lot like us, who talks a lot like that, who thinks a lot, who acts a lot like us. It's a false image. It's a false idol. Now, I'm not going to deep dive this, I do a little deconstruction in chapter five, God In The Hands Of Angry People but let me cut to the chase. What comes to mind when you think about God? What is God's posture towards you? What expression is God wearing on his face? What is the tone of his voice? If God has a frown on his face, I think you're getting colder, colder. If God has smile lines around his eyes, if he's reaching out with arms wide open, I think you're getting warmer, warmer, and if God's posture is one of blessing, if you are the apple of his eye, if you can hear the love and pride and joy in the tone of his voice, as he says, you are my son, you are my daughter in whom I am well pleased, I think you're getting hotter, hotter.

Well, welcome to National Community Church, all seven campuses. We are in a series called 'Double Blessing' and I want to pick up where we left off last weekend before original sin, there was original blessing. That sequence is significant. Blessing is God's most ancient instinct. It sets the tone, it sets the table. Now, God won't bless greed or pride or laziness. We have to position ourselves for the blessing, but make no mistake about it, God's posture is one of blessing, this is God's default setting. God wants to bless you beyond your ability to ask or imagine. God has blessings in categories you can't even conceive of.

If you have a Bible you can meet me in First Thessalonians. Paul planted the church in Thessaloniki on his second missionary journey. He is writing this letter a few years later, right around 51 A D. The church finds itself in some challenging circumstances. Maybe you're in some of those challenging circumstances this weekend and Paul offers this exhortation in chapter five verse 16. Now these are some of the shortest verses in the Bible, but they pack a punch.

Verse 16 *Rejoice always,*

Verse 17 *pray continually,*

Verse 18 *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

If we were to play a little word association game and I were to say discerning the will of God, I'm guessing that many of us, maybe most of us would think logistics. We think who, what, when, where and how. Discerning the will of God is decision making. It's making the right move at the right time and that is certainly a piece of this puzzle. Listen, I have no doubt God is ordering your footsteps. God is preparing good works in advance. God is setting up divine appointments and listen, we need to obey those promptings of the Holy Spirit. That said, the will of God is a lot less circumstantial and a lot more attitudinal than we think. In fact, you already know the will of God. Rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Now, when I was in my twenties, that was a few years ago, I was way too worried about making wrong turns. I was afraid that one miscue and the whole house of cards might come down. Let me take a little bit of pressure off of us this weekend. God wants you to get where God wants you to go more than you want to get where God wants you to go and God is really good at getting us there. Listen, the will of God is less about logistics and more about cultivating the character of Christ in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. I said this last week, listen, the circumstances you want God to change may be the circumstances that God is using to change you.

In their brilliant book 'Decisive' Chip and Dan Heath talk about four mistakes we make when it comes to decision making. One of those mistakes is narrow framing. It's defining our choices too narrowly. It's thinking in either/or categories instead of both/and categories. Or maybe it's answering it as a true/false when God is actually giving us a multiple choice and we do this when it comes to the will of God. The Heath brothers tell a story about Father Brian Bransfield, the general secretary of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. And Father Bransfield makes this observation about when parishioners kind of seek out his advice and he said they have a tendency to narrow frame. They find themselves in a dilemma. Should I marry this person? Should I take this job in another city? Should I become a priest? Bransfield says this, there's a myth that there's only one thing that God wants you to do. We spend so much time trying to figure out that one thing and become so fearful of making a mistake. We miss the will of God because we're afraid of missing the will of God. We miss out on the will of God because we don't want to miss out on the will of God. Are you picking up what I'm throwing down?

He says, actually there are 18 things that God would be very happy if you chose. You're not cornered into becoming a priest or not. You're not cornered into marrying this woman or not. He says, you're telling me that God looked at you and said, there is only one thing you can do in your life, I know it and you have to guess it or else. Could it be that we are putting our constraints on God.

Just take a deep breath this weekend and let it out. We narrow frame God and we narrow frame God's will. What I'm getting at will of God less circumstantial, more attitudinal. So what I want to do this weekend is unpack these verses and I want to talk about cultivating the attitude of gratitude. If my math is right, we're 40 days from Thanksgiving and so great time for a little tune up.

Three things, number one, whatever you don't turn into praise turns into pride. James 1:17, *"Every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights."* This is the genesis of gratitude. It's all from God and it's all for God. And it's not just what we perceive to be blessings. I'm not sure we know enough to know whether something is a blessing or a curse up front. I think sometimes what we discerned to be a blessing actually back fires because we don't steward it the right way and it becomes a curse or what we perceived to be a curse actually is a blessing in disguise because it's the catalyst for who God is creating us to be.

Now, let me go old school. According to the Talmud, the Jewish commentary on the Old Testament, it says a man embezzles from God when he makes use of this world without uttering a blessing. In other words, if you enjoy something without thanking God, it's as if you have stolen it from him. So anything less than gratitude is grand larceny. Now an observant Jew would pronounce 100 blessings per day. Those blessings would start with Barukh ata Adonai and then they would fill in the blank with a thousand different things. We'll kind of go back to basics, according to rabbinic tradition; a man should taste nothing before he utters a blessing. And so they would offer a blessing before a meal like many of us, but then they would take it a little bit further because they would offer blessings during the meal for different tastes and different smells. Now an observant Jew would bless God for a new day, new article of clothing, a new experience. One of my favorite blessings is zoological on seeing an elephant, a tailless ape or a long tail ape one should say, blessed be he, who makes strange creatures. Now, I don't know why they're choosing these particular animals, but I love this approach path to life. Whenever they experienced something pleasurable, they would bless God. When was the last time you blessed God after having sex with your spouse? I mean, it was his idea, right, and maybe we ought to bless him more often.

Now. I think what impresses me most is the way that Orthodox Judaism with nuance blessing, and let me explain what I mean. It wouldn't simply bless God for rainfall Rabbi Judah said, we give thanks unto you for every rain drop you caused to fall on us. There are 90,921 drops in a gallon of water. Do you see what's happening here? I think too often generic gratitude is about as good as generic confession. I'm sorry for everything I've ever done. Oh that's great. Like we didn't let our kids get by with that when they were little. No, you got it. What are you sorry for? Cause if you can't answer it, you're going to do it again. Listen in the same way, Lord, thank you for everything you've ever done. Oh really? Well that's great. But could we nuance it a little bit more?

Let me ask the obvious question; why 100 blessings? Well, during the days of King David, a devastating plague is said to have claimed the lives of a hundred Israelites every single day. That's when a council of Jewish rabbis prescribed this practice of reciting 100 blessings per day to counteract the plague, and according to tradition, the plague stopped immediately. Now listen, I can't promise that gratitude is going to cure whatever ails you, but it is a pretty good antibiotic.

Is it not? It is all purpose. We won't get into the science of gratitude, but this is where the double blessing begins. Bottom line, whatever you don't turn into praise turns into pride.

Now, let me push the envelope a little bit further and if you're taking notes, I want you to jot this down. Praise God for partial miracles. In the Gospels, there is a two-part miracle that I find fascinating and encouraging. Jesus lays hands on a blind man and this man experiences a partial miracle. His sight is restored, but not completely. People still look like trees walking. This is where many of us doubt God instead of praising God for a partial miracle. Listen, this is where many of us give up because we didn't get the whole miracle. Even Jesus had to pray twice. Okay, some miracles happen in stages. There are moments when we need to double down with prayer and fasting. And so all too often I think we withhold praise for partial miracles and then wonder why the whole miracle never happens. Why not praise God every step of the way, even if it's two steps forward and one step back.

This is so personal for me. You know, July 2nd, 2016 I pray a brave prayer after 40 years with asthma. God heals my lungs. I have not touched an inhaler, a 1,203 days. Praise God. Now you know that but there's a back-story that I've only shared a time or two. About a month before that miracle, I climbed Cadillac Mountain in Maine. Now, not the tallest mountain I've ever climbed, but I did it without an inhaler, which was huge for me. In fact, it's one of the longest streaks that I can remember in 40 years. I went four days without an inhaler and I remember thinking to myself, God, did you heal me? And then day five, I had to take a couple of puffs of my inhaler. And you know what? It almost knocked the wind out of my faith, but instead of focusing on the fact that I had to take my inhaler on day five, I decided to praise God that I went four days without it. In fact, I remember this moment on a prayer night that I just felt like I needed to share this testimony. I needed to praise God for a partial miracle. And so it was a deeper night way back when, and I shared this testimony. Do you know it was about a week later that God then healed my lungs? Now listen, hindsight's 20/20 and Oswald Chambers said, let God be as original with others as he was with you. Okay? This is less prescriptive and more descriptive. But I believe that publicly praising God for that partial miracle was one small step one giant leap toward the blessing, double blessing of two healed lungs. So praise God for partial miracles.

Alright, number two, your focus determines your reality. In case you care, this is what Qui-Gon said to Anakin Skywalker in Star Wars episode one. Now, I know it sounds like a Jedi mind trick, but Paul was preaching this Gospel 2000 years ago. Philippians four he says,

Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

If you are looking for something to complain about you will always find it. If you are looking for something to be grateful for, you will always find it.

A few decades ago, a study was done with college students consisted of two questions. One, how happy are you; two, how many dates have you had in the last month? Researchers found a weak correlation between the level of happiness and the number of dates, but then those tricky researchers flipped the questions. How many dates have you had in the last month? How happy

are you? All of a sudden a strong correlation between those two things. Why? Because of the sequence of questions. The students were now focused on their dating status or lack thereof. Psychologists call it the focusing effect. Now, one of my favorite studies involves Olympic medalists. A professor at Northwestern University, Vicki Medvec, found that bronze medalists are quantifiably happier than silver medalist. That makes no sense at all because silver medalist beat the bronze medalist which means they should feel better about the outcome than those who lost to them. Yes? Here's what Medvec discovered. The silver medalist tended to focus on how close they came to winning gold and weren't satisfied with silver. Bronze medalists focus on how close they came to not winning a medal at all and were just happy to be on the medal stand. Now, the technical term for what's happening here is called a counterfactual and there are two kinds of counterfactuals. There's an upward and a downward counterfactual. An upward counterfactual is focusing on how things could have been better, like winning gold instead of silver, and it tends to produce feelings of frustration. A downward counter-factual is focusing on how things could be worse, like not winning a medal at all and it produces feelings of gratitude.

Now, let me have a little bit of fun. I came across a fictitious letter a few years ago, written by a college student that I think illustrates this idea well;

Dear Mom and Dad,

I have so much to tell you because of the fire in my dorm set up by student riots; I experienced temporary lung damage and had to go the hospital. While I was there I fell in love with an orderly, we moved in together. I dropped out of school when I found out I was pregnant, and he got fired because of his drinking, so we're moving to Alaska, where we might get married after the birth of our baby.

Your loving daughter,

PS, None of this really happened, but I did flunk my chemistry class and wanted to keep it in perspective.

Downward counterfactual.

Let me go back to Philippians four

Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Joy is not getting what you want; it's appreciating what you have. It's not changing your circumstances; it is changing your focus.

A few weeks ago I was at the mall of America and Minnesota there for some meetings and I had no idea all the things I did not have. I had no idea how much I wanted and how much yea I even needed until I walked through the Mall of America. It is the mall effect. It is an upward counterfactual that causes us to focus on what we do not have, but we want it. Flip that coin. In

the last two decades, we've taken 272 mission trips as a church, but we say this all time; one mission trip worth more than 52 sermons. Why? Well, listen, I believe we make a difference when we love people and serve people wherever we go. But you know what I've learned? Every trip I've gone on I'm the primary beneficiary because if you go on a mission trip to a third world country, it is a reality check. Most of our problems, first world problems, and when you spend enough time in a place where people make \$2 a day, it's a downward counterfactual and you're filled with gratitude for things like indoor plumbing, things that you would take for granted otherwise,

I want you to hear what I'm about to say. You can be stressed and blessed at the same time. Blessing is not no problems. In fact, the blessings of God, we talked about it last week, will complicate your life, but it will complicate your life in a way that it should be complicated. At the end of the day, here's the bottom line. Either your theology will conform to your reality or your reality will conform to your theology. Either you will filter your circumstances through the character of God or you will filter the character of God through your circumstances. One way or the other, your focus determines your reality.

Number three, don't let what's wrong with you, keep you from worshiping what's right with God. If you focus on what's wrong with you, it is game set, match. Listen, enemy pretty good at this, accuser of the brethren. It's this thing called condemnation. You know what it is? It's feeling guilt over confessed sin. It's already forgiven and forgotten, but we can't quite forgive ourselves. Now, if you focus on what's right with God, well now its game on. Listen, the good news of the Gospel is this; you aren't defined by what you've done wrong. God made him who had no sin become sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of Christ. You are defined by what Christ accomplished on the cross. And so when I'm frustrated, when I'm discouraged, when I'm lonely, when I'm scared, I make a beeline for the cross. Why? Because I know that no matter how bad my circumstances may be, my sin is nailed to the cross and I know that I am worth the cross to Christ. Listen, the cross is where the curse is broken. The cross is where the blessing is bestowed. And I think that's where we're getting hotter, hotter.

Let me close with the challenge. If you' were here last week, Lora and I gifted a copy of 'Double Blessing' and you'll find a gratitude journal on page 92. If my math is right, 40 days til Thanksgiving, perfect time for gratitude, an attitude of gratitude to kind of exercise this muscle. And so let me give you three things real quick. Simple as one, two, three,

- One; buy a journal. Doesn't matter what size or color or shape, but there's something powerful about writing things down. And I've found this to be true, whether I'm writing out a confession or I'm writing out a gratitude. I think this is one way that we take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.
- Number two, I want to challenge you to write down three gratitudes each day. I thought of observant Jews pronounced a hundred blessings a day. Yeah, but if you try to go from zero to a hundred you're going to pull a gratitude hamstring, right? And so maybe we start with three gratitudes a day and if you do that, you'll have 120 by Thanksgiving. At the base of your brain stem there is a cluster of nerve cells called the reticular activating system. It determines what we notice, what goes unnoticed. When you set a life goal, for example, it creates a category in that reticular activating system and it helps you notice

anything and everything that will help you accomplish that goal. I think a gratitude journal has the same effect. It creates a category. This is about sanctifying the reticular activating love God with all of your _____. Wouldn't that include that little cluster of cells at the base of the brain stem? This is where the battle is won and lost, is it not? What we notice what goes unnoticed I think a double blessing mindset begins with looking for those things to be grateful for.

- And then finally, number three, write down something different every day. And this is where I want to push you a little bit. Listen, you can thank God for the sunrise day one, but can you get a little bit more creative day two or three? You know maybe take the photosynthesis angle. Okay? Or the vitamin D angle, or if you like this kind of stuff, the Goldilocks zone angle. Okay? Find something else a unique way to thank God for that.

Now, the English authored GK Chesterton once stated that his all ultimate goal in life was to take nothing for granted, not a sunrise, not a flower, not a laugh. And I love that goal and I think this gratitude challenge kind of points us in the right direction. So one of the great challenges we face is this thing called inattention blindness. It's the failure to notice that things that are right in front of us hidden in plain view. You know, Leonardo da Vinci said the average person looks without seeing, listens, without hearing, touches without feeling, eats, without tasting, inhales without awareness of odor or fragrance and talks without thinking. Let me give you an example, right now it feels like you're sitting still. No, you're not. You're on a planet that spinning around its axis at a thousand miles per hour. It'll make one full rotation today and not only that, we're traveling about 66,000 miles per hour. You'll travel 1.3 million miles today through space and you didn't have any big plans. Question, when was the last time you thank God for keeping us in orbit? When was the last time you hit your knees and said, God, I wasn't sure we were going to make the full rotation today, but you did it again? Probably never because we don't think that way.

Here's my point, there are macroscopic miracles happening all around us all the time. They're hidden in plain sight and then there are microscopic miracles, about 37 sextillion chemical reactions happening in your body at any given moment. I think that's about 37 sextillion thank yous that we owe God. Here's the thing, it's so easy to go through the motion, so easy to put it in autopilot, so easy to start complaining about what's wrong.

In Genesis 28 Jacob is on a little camping trip in the city called Luz that gets renamed Bethel. And wow. Jacob gets woke right? He wakes up in more ways than one. It says, Genesis 28 verse 17

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Listen, I think the goal of this gratitude challenge is to wake up to all the different ways that God is working in us and around us all the time. Listen, God is present, God is omnipresent, what's absent is our awareness? May God remove that veil. May God give us spiritual eyes to see.

I'm going to invite our worship teams to come and all of our campuses, our team wrote a song that we sang last week and we're going to sing it again this week. Last weekend, did a little bit of a SWOT analysis of ourselves. This weekend I want us to count our blessings. I want to get a jump on this gratitude journal? I bet you could come up with three in just the next couple of minutes. Now, yes, confession is admitting what's wrong, but confession is so much more than that. Confession is declaring what's right with God. Last time I checked, we enter his gates with thanksgiving and so you don't even get in the front door without the attitude of gratitude. Do you remember what Jesus did before he broke bread? It says he gave thanks. We read right past it. Listen, it was his body that was about to be broken. It was his blood that was about to be shed. Give thanks in all circumstances. I think that's what Jesus was doing. So can we take a few minutes this weekend as we prepare to take the communion cup, that cup of blessing? Let me just say, you might be here for the first time or maybe you've never celebrated communion before. I can't think of a better way to take a first step or next step in your relationship with God. Listen, open invitation to take those elements. His kindness leads us to repentance. His mercies are new every morning. God demonstrates his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And so before our campus pastors come and they'll lead us in communion in just a few moments could we exercise the attitude of gratitude.