

January 21, 2018, Conley Presbyterian Church **Paul's Attitude of Gratitude** - Rick Leissner

Readings: Psalm 136: 1-12,26. Colossians 3:12-17 Today's readings offer us much solid teaching and guidance, but the theme that really spoke to me is gratitude. With the holidays just passed, we were all again very blessed, & it is a great time to talk about gratitude - an attitude of gratitude. To begin with, all we are & all we have comes from God – *an inconvenient & uncomfortable truth for some of us.*

Martin Luther called gratitude "The basic Christian attitude", & it is still referred to as "the heart of the gospel." As children, gratitude was drilled into us by our parents. We learned to say 'thank you'. 'Thank you for our food.' 'Thank you for the gift.' 'Thank you God, for keeping us safe'. Sometimes we expressed our gratitude in words, sometimes in deeds.

Unfortunately, in today's 'me first' culture, it is easy to move from thankfulness to thank-lessness. We can think, "Why give thanks for something that was owed to us anyway – we *deserve* it".....We can feel entitled to it. We get furious when we don't get what we want - when we want it. The result is selfishness, disappointment, & anger.

Like I saw my friend Doug the other day - he looked really forlorn - almost in tears. So I asked him, "Why so sad, my friend?" • He said, "Three weeks ago, my first grandchild was born on New Year's Day and everyone is doing fine." • So I said, "Wonderful!" • Then he says, "Then 2 weeks ago, a raffle ticket I bought won me a new car." • So I said, "Sounds to me like you've been very blessed. You should be grateful and happy" • "You don't understand!", he interrupted. "Then a week ago, an uncle I did not even know died and left me \$32,000." • Now I was really confused - I said, "Wow, that's great, so why are you so glum?" • So then he says, "But THIS week . . . I've gotten nothing!"

But perhaps no Bible hero expressed gratitude better than Paul. His gratitude helped form Christianity. Paul was deeply flawed, but he was arguably the most influential person in the early church - not named Jesus.

And Paul was a great role model for gratitude. Bible Scholar Clyde Pilkington counted at least 35 places where Paul expressed gratitude in his letters.

Ironically, Paul had been a faithful Pharisee, seriously persecuting Christians. Paul admits in Galatians he had wanted to destroy Christianity. You know the story. But God dramatically showed HIS will & His ways to Paul on the road to Damascus. A bright light shone from heaven – Paul was blinded & fell to the ground. Right there, God totally changed Paul's life - to serving Christ's Church. Paul was born again & given a new direction. Jesus showed Paul the way to salvation.

Paul spent the rest of his life thanking God for his salvation & his new life – given thru the life and saving work of Jesus Christ. And Jesus did the same for us! Paul was grateful to God for calling him & using him as His disciple. He wrote to his friend Timothy, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, & an insolent man". Paul gladly endured many hardships to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. His efforts brought thousands to Christianity, & he laid the foundation for the billions of Christians who came after them. Paul also showed gratitude to others - recognizing their contributions & thanking them. God certainly used Paul's talents, but Paul realized he could not do it alone. Paul needed others to support him & sustain his ministry. Throughout his letters, Paul continuously thanked God & his fellow workers. We call on others to help with the work of Christ's church too. When we recognize their work, we follow Paul's example, thanking God for their contributions, & their faith. Gratitude also humbles us, and humility is a GOOD thing. This church does many good things, too, but no one does it alone. We all have God-given gifts – so when other people share their gifts – let us thank them. We honor others by being grateful, acknowledging them, & encouraging them to continue doing God's work. One meaning of "*appreciation*" is "*to raise in value*". When you appreciate your spouse, you raise their value. When you appreciate your kids, you raise their value. When you appreciate your co-workers, you raise their value. And when you appreciate your friends, you raise their value. I am sure when you gave your appreciation for Pastor Ken, that raised his value. And it was clear he loved you all and appreciated you too. As human beings, we all have the need to be encouraged - affirmed - loved - appreciated. I know I do. You have made

me feel welcome and appreciated, and that makes me feel more valued too. THANK YOU!

Paul even thanked God for his problems, infirmities, & tribulations. It ain't easy to thank God when life stinks, is it? But no matter how bad things get, there are always many things left to be thankful for. And we can choose to be grateful for what we have. There is a wise saying that says – it is not getting what we want, but wanting what we get that makes life blessed.

In his letters, Paul also teaches us that God uses our difficulties to develop our character, & to build us up. We all face difficulties: financial, personal, health, & others. But as Christians, our God-given gifts are infinitely greater than any struggles we face. Plus, God promises to be with us as we go thru them !

Just as Paul looked past his substantial troubles & continued to work for the good of the Church - we too can look beyond our own trials, & focus on why we're here - - to glorify God & enjoy Him forever.

In addition, our gratitude worships God. Prayer is a primary way we show our thankfulness to God. We also show gratitude to the Lord by the way we live, which itself can be an act of worship. When we keep God's commandments & serve others, we show we love God & are grateful.

And, as an added bonus, we get many benefits for being grateful too. Studies show gratitude is the healthiest human emotion - the more grateful we are, the happier & healthier we'll be - physically & spiritually.

For example, research also shows that the first five minutes of our day sets the mood for the rest of it. If we try thinking of some things to thank God for before we even get out of bed each morning - it can change our whole day. It's the difference between saying, "Good morning God", versus saying "Good God, morning!"

One of my few good habits is to sit down regularly and make a list of the things I am most thankful for – I can tell you it has been very meaningful for me over the years.

Dr. Stephen Post shared some results from his Case Western Medical School study about ways thankful people benefit by their attitude of gratitude:

- Just 15 minutes a day focusing on things you're thankful for will significantly increase your body's natural antibodies & immune system.
- Grateful people are measurably more focused mentally, and less vulnerable to clinical depression.
- Feelings of gratitude induce a physiological body state called 'resonance', which helps with a healthier blood pressure & heart rate.
- Grateful recipients of donated organs heal faster.

- Caring for others is very draining. But even caregivers are healthier, less fatigued, and more effective when they have an attitude of gratitude.

An attitude of gratitude can transform our life. Imagine following Paul's attitude of gratitude. If God so radically transformed & used Paul, imagine how much God can transform & use you. Imagine living your life in gratitude for what you have, rather than feeling anger, stress, or entitlement. Gratitude pleases & glorifies God, makes us better Christians, & makes us happier and healthier. My friends, it is still early in 2018 – why not make our New Year's resolution this year to be more grateful for what we have, and develop an attitude of gratitude? I cannot think of many better resolutions, and one that God will surely help us accomplish ! And let us especially remember to be grateful for the greatest gift of all – “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen