

## Week 5: Disciplines of Gratitude

*“If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.”*

Meister Eckhart

### The Value of Gratitude

Our mothers taught us to “count our blessings”, Oprah taught us to keep a thankfulness journal, and the Bible instructs us to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Thess. 5:18) Now science has come up with at least 7 benefits (and possibly as many as 31 benefits!) of practicing gratitude.

1. Gratitude opens the doors to more relationships. The study found that thanking a new acquaintance makes them more likely to seek an ongoing relationship.
2. Grateful people sleep better.
3. Gratitude improves self-esteem.
4. Gratitude improves physical health – including the heart and immune system
5. Gratitude improves psychological health – reducing both depression and aggression
6. Gratitude enhances empathy and helpfulness.
7. Gratitude increases resilience and mental strength.

### A Parable about Gratitude - Matthew 18:21-35

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”*

*Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”*

*“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

*“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.*

*“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.*

*“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’*

*“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.*

*“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

*“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

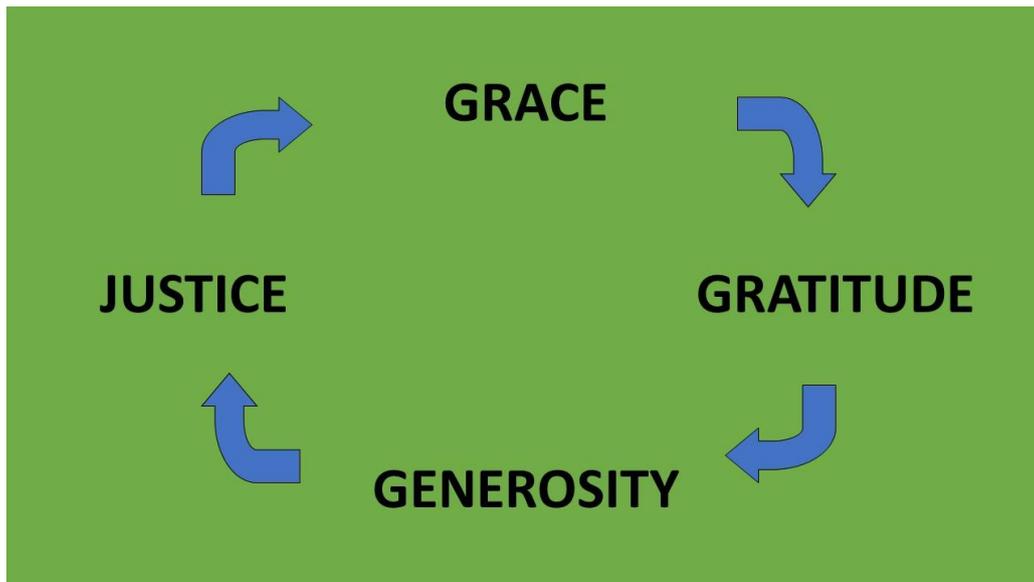
The clear implication of this parable is that we are to offer grace or forgiveness to others on the basis that we have received grace and forgiveness from God ourselves. This is a graphic depiction of a principle that has been part of the Divine/Human relationship within the Judeo-Christian tradition from the time that God called Abraham in Genesis 12. I would refer to this principle as the Grace Cycle and it is expressed in the words of God's call to Abraham,

“I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, But I will curse those who curse you.

And through you I will bless all the nations.” (Gen 12:2-3)

### The Grace Cycle



The cycle begins with **Grace**. God, as the original “unmoved first mover”, acts in divine providence to supply all our needs. God causes the harvest to grow and bear fruit.

The appropriate human response to God's Grace is **Gratitude**. This is the reason we celebrate the harvest, it's the reason we tithe – indeed it is the only reason we worship at all (cf Westminster Shorter Catechism).

**Generosity** is demanded of us to turn our Gratitude into action. We are expected to “pay it forward”. This is the principle underlying Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23ff), where he points out the absurdity of remaining merciless in the wake of God's Grace. This step corresponds to the extension of the harvest celebrations to include the Levite, the alien, the widow and the orphan (Deut 14:29).

If Generosity is shared without favour it results in true **Justice**, where there is sufficient provision for all.

Interestingly, Justice is not the culmination of a process but a stage in a cycle. OT prophecy indicates that God has chosen that a just society is the very place where God will bestow Grace (Ps 133 for example). This is not to say that Grace can be demanded or controlled (for then it would no longer be grace), but that Justice brings about the kind of environment in which God is pleased to pour out blessing.

Among its many applications, this depiction of the Grace Cycle offers one explanation for the age-old problem of God's apparent non-involvement or non-intervention in the world to bring about universal justice, peace, welfare, etc. The Grace Cycle suggests that God's gracious provision is sufficient for there to be justice etc. for all. Indeed, God could theoretically "skip" the Grace Cycle and, by simple divine fiat, achieve universal equality by simply providing equally and uniformly for everyone. Yet God does not. God blesses some and not all equally. By doing so, God opens the possibility for us to participate alongside God, as stewards of the blessings poured out, to bring about the justice and care for all. One could argue that this has been a gross miscalculation of the inherent goodness/badness of humanity on God's part, but there it is: for better or worse, God has invited us to be co-workers in making this world a fair and flourishing kingdom. If it is not so, it is in large part because we have reneged on our responsibility to respond in gratitude and generosity to God's grace.

## **Disciplines of Gratitude**

### **1. Saying Grace at Mealtimes**

The simple act of thanksgiving for our daily meals, while not commanded by Scripture (except possibly in Deuteronomy 8:10), has been practiced within Judaism and Christianity from the earliest times. You can give thanks before the meal, after the meal, or both.

### **2. Sabbath Keeping**

Sabbath-keeping is not, and never should be, an opportunity for legalism or slavish observance. It was always intended to be a joyous celebration of the gift of time.

The reasons given in the 10 Commandments for Sabbath-keeping are as follows:

*"In six days I, the LORD, made the earth, the sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the LORD, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy." (Exodus 20)*

*"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that I, the LORD your God, rescued you by my great power and strength. That is why I command you to observe the Sabbath." (Deuteronomy 5)*

So, the reasons we keep the Sabbath are: a) to follow God's creative example and b) to recall and celebrate freedom (ours as well as that of others). Slaves have no free time.

They cannot rest as free people do. So to stop and rest for a day is to be reminded that we are not units of production but fully human beings, created in God's image.

Sabbath rest allows us time to give thanks for our freedom and also to enjoy what we have. At the same time, by allowing those around us to rest, we acknowledge their freedom and full humanity too.

What should (may) we do during our Sabbath rest? Whatever gives us joy as free human beings. Worship, play, recreation, time-wasting, rest, community, solitude.

What should we avoid doing during our Sabbath rest? Whatever causes us or others to be slaves. Having a good rest yourself at the expense of others and their freedom is just unkind. Using your Sabbath rest to "catch-up" on all the things you didn't finish during the week is really just another way of being a slave to productivity.

### **3. Tithing**

Tithing is not, and never should be, an opportunity for legalism or slavish observance. Nor can it be seen as a bargaining chip to gain more blessings from God. We do not “sow” our tithe in the hope that we will “reap” a hundredfold from God’s store. It was always intended to be a joyous celebration of the gift of God’s provision.

My favourite description of the tithe in relation to the harvest is found in Deuteronomy 18, where it is depicted as an opportunity for a huge party. The tithe is not given to the Temple or religious authorities but is spent by the worshippers on an absolute blow-out party. The implication being that the thanksgiving be joyous and generous.

Without wanting to make this a law for others, let me say what helps me in this discipline:

- Having a set percentage for giving helps me because sometimes I earn much and sometimes I earn little and a percentage of giving makes it possible for me to give according to my means.
- Timing my giving close to when I actually receive my income helps me to match my gratitude to God’s provision and also means that I am giving from what I receive and not from what I have left over after I have spent.
- Giving to my local church helps me to be obedient to those God has set in authority around me. I try not to be too picky about where my money goes because, after all, it is not “my” money at all.

### **4. Other Disciplines of Gratitude and Action**

There are many other ways to practice the discipline of gratitude including journal keeping and letter writing. It is also helpful to give some thought to how one might move from prayer to action, or from gratitude to generosity. Volunteering, letter-writing, being part of a prayer group, social activism and performing Random Acts of Kindness can all be part of moving us from gratitude to generosity.

Be generous with compliments and with your praise and thanks for those who serve you, especially in what would otherwise be thankless tasks.