

January 4 The Makings of a Life of Gratitude
Part One: Seeing All as Gift
I Corinthians 4.7

Opening prayer based on Ephesians 1.17-18

God of Messiah Jesus our Lord, the Father of Glory, we pray that you would give us, in our spirits, the gift of seeing things people can't normally see, because we are coming to know you – to have the eyes of our inmost selves opened to your light. Then we will know exactly what the hope is that goes with our call; and we will know the wealth of the glory of our inheritance as your holy people.

adapted from the New Testament for Everyone, trans. NT Wright

* * *

As we begin, sitting here on the threshold between one year and another, I want to ask you to take a moment to think about the circumstances in which you find yourself:

What is ending? What is beginning? What is continuing?
What is joyful in your life? What is difficult?
Which of your relationships come easily? Which of them are costly?
What has God been doing in your life? And what do you sense He is inviting you into next?

Dag Hammarskjöld was a Swedish diplomat who, in 1955, was elected to serve as the Secretary General, the highest administrative office, of the United Nations. He carried out the role in such an exemplary way that he won the deepest respect of his colleagues and was elected to a second term. Eventually he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work.

In 1961, while on a peacemaking mission to the Congo, he died in an airplane crash. By his bed, together with his beloved copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, he left his journal.

Starting at the age of twenty, he had kept what he described at one point as "a sort of *white book* concerning my negotiations with myself and with my God."

His journal was published after his death as a book called *Markings*. The entries reveal a man who is a deeply devoted and deeply reflective follower of Jesus.

I want to read to you what is likely the most familiar of all of his journal entries. You've heard me quote it before:

For all that has been—thanks!
To all that will be—yes!

The end of one year and the start of another is a natural time to stop for a moment, or at least to slow down for a bit, to take stock of our lives, and to make some adjustments.

Ever since Rene' introduced this quote to me a number of years ago, I've thought that it was the best way I know to pray in the new year.

For all that has been—thanks!
To all that will be—yes!

These words invite a lifting up of our eyes from our immediate circumstances to the God who is in and over them.

Though it doesn't mention God's name, it clearly implies and invites his presence and involvement in every part of life. It is a prayer and an offering to God. It says essentially:

For all that is past, I express my thanks *to you, Lord*.
And for all that is to come, I say *yes to you*.

This prayer also invites a turning of our eyes from the future, with all of its uncertainties, to the past, and all of the ways we have met God there.

You know this about our human nature. We tend to focus on what isn't: what still needs to be done, what we still lack, where we still fall short.

You could call it *The Tube Syndrome*.

In every subway station in London there are caution signs painted along the edge of the platforms to make passengers aware of the dangerous space between the platform and the train. They say: "Mind the Gap."

And we do. It is to the gap that our focus inevitably goes. To what's missing, what's lacking, that gap between what we want and what we have, between who we are and who we want to be.

Gap minding is a reflex of the human heart. Our eyes and our hearts just automatically drift to what isn't instead of what is.

I remember when I was about 13 or 14, painting the fence on our property. Our house sat on several acres, and it was surrounded on three sides by a white three-board fence that was about the length of two football fields, and one summer my dad asked my brother and me to paint it.

I remember often during those two or three weeks standing up in the hot sun, leaning wearily with my paint-spattered forearms on the top plank, and looking ahead at all that still remained to be done.

I'm not sure it ever occurred to me to turn around and look at the growing amount of completed work that was accumulating behind us.

Hammarskjöld's prayer presses us to turn our gaze from what is undone and incomplete and lacking ahead of us and to look back at the way that God has faithfully fulfilled his purposes and been true to his promises in all that lies behind us.

And the same time, this prayer invites us to turn our eyes back the other way as well, from the past to the future.

Having looked back on the past with a heart of gratitude, having looked carefully for evidence of the goodness, the faithfulness, the generosity of God, only then do we turn to take in the future, having as part of our outlook a shored-up confidence in that same goodness, and faithfulness, and generosity of God in the days to come.

It's a prayer that reflects a deep understanding of the utter trustworthiness of God's character in all things, and not just in the easy or convenient things.

For *all* that is past, thanks. You have been ceaselessly faithful, and your faithfulness has been revealed in every dimension of my life.
So you are to be trusted completely with my unknown future. It is unknown to me, but not to you. I gladly and freely give my life over to you. For *all* that is to come, yes.

We are extrapolating the fidelity and constancy of God from the known past to the unknown future.

The more consistently I look back at God's faithfulness in the past, and reflect on how he has met me and cared for me and watched over me and seen me through, the more readily I will embrace what God has for me in the future, because my starting point with each fresh step into the future will be a posture of deeper and deeper trust.

Think again for a moment about those circumstances in which you find yourself now as one year ends and another begins. Now just pause for a moment and look back across this past year and reflect on how faithfully God met you, provided for you, was with you, fulfilled his purposes for you, in the past. Now bring your gaze back to the present. How much easier to trust him in the future when we thank him for the past.

At the end of 1939, just as Europe was being pitched into the horrible uncertainties of a world war, King George the VI of England in his year-end radio broadcast read these lines from a poem by Minnie Haskell.

They capture perfectly this idea of extrapolating the certain goodness of God into an uncertain future.

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'
 And he replied,
 'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
 That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'
 So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.*

This hints at one other dimension of why it is so important for us to look back with gratitude as a way of moving faithfully into the future. It has to do with where the paths of God will lead us.

During the Christmas season, you'll remember we focused on the idea of opening the door of our lives to the God who has come to us in a stable in Bethlehem and knocked on our door.

As you may have already discovered, once we open the door of our lives to God, and begin to live out the Christian life, we discover two things at the same time:

There is always more God has *for* us as we live our lives *with* him.

And there is always more God asks *of* us as we live our lives *for* him.

When we open the door to God, we will begin to experience the limitless bounty of his presence, his provision, his goodness, his generosity.

But at the same time, we will begin to discover his limitless claims on us as King, that he is inviting us in ever deepening ways to yield our lives up to him, to become more fully relinquished, more fully his.

The more we dwell on how good and constant and faithful God has been to us in the past, the more we can trust him as we open our lives up to him even more fully in the future.

Which lets us say:

For all that has been—thanks!
 And . . . to all that will be—yes!

As we continue to learn together what it means to love God, to love one another in our church family, and to pour out our love on the people God places around us in this world, there is still much that God has for us, and much that God asks of us.

That's why, following Hammar skjold's lead, we are beginning the new year with a series on gratitude.

* * *

In this series, which will take us to the middle of February, we will be learning together the makings of a life of gratitude. As we'll see in the weeks ahead . . .

It begins with simply seeing, opening our eyes to see that everything we have has come to us as gift.

And not just seeing, but making a point of remembering. We'll explore together why a life of gratitude is so important – what are the costs of forgetting and what are the benefits of remembering that everything is gift.

We'll offer practical ideas about how we can grow in gratitude – suggesting lots of specific practices that can help us become more grateful as a way of life.

We'll look at the importance of giving thanks together, and expose the myth that gratitude can be a solo enterprise.

And then we'll end by taking three consecutive Sundays to grow in our ability to recognize that there is reason for gratitude in *all* circumstances, even the hard ones, and to unpack the many gifts God gives when life gets really difficult

* * *

Gratitude begins by seeing the gifts that God gives, and by seeing the things about us and about God that those gifts reveal.

Let's pause here for just a moment. What exactly is a gift?

Maybe you could define a gift as: a thoughtful present or a thoughtful gesture, given to another not as payment and not for payment, but simply as an expression of the generous heart of the giver.

According to the Scriptures we are all on the receiving end of God's gift giving. There are presents for every one of us under his tree.

But according to Scripture, that isn't just true of a few amazing things that end up in our hands along the course of our lives. It is true of *everything* that comes into our hands. Everything.

In the Scriptures God calls us to see everything that ends up in our hands as a gift from him.

I Corinthians 4.7

What do you have that you did not receive as gift?

Every bit of it undeserved, unearned, unpaid for. Given freely, with joy.

1 Chronicles 29:14

Everything we have has come from you.

Think about the things that have come to you over the last twenty-four hours, let alone the last twenty four years. The abilities, the opportunities, the relationships, the resources, the provisions, the glimpses of God in the beauty of creation and the in the love of others.

What do you have that you did not receive as gift?

* * *

So what do God's gifts reveal to us?

Well, for one thing, they reveal the lavish and loving heart of God, pointing to and making tangible the riches of his generosity.

James 1.17

Every good and perfect gift is from above

Romans 11.36

From him are all things. To him be the glory.

We can draw a direct line from the gifts strewn around us and the generous God who bestows them. Every good gift is from him. From him are all things.

This Christmas I received some incredibly lavish and thoughtful gifts from my wife and my children.

Didn't pay for them. Didn't earn them. They were just given out of a crazily generous heart.

And that's what made each gift so special. They each revealed not something about my worthiness as the recipient, but something about the generous heart of the giver.

God is not stingy. His heart is bountiful. As Jesus taught in Matthew 7

Matthew 7:9–11

Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.

God is a giver of gifts. It is his heart to be generous to us. As Romans 8.32 says

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

The gifts God gives reveal the bountiful riches and the lavish love of the Giver.

They also reveal the extent of our neediness as his creatures, exposing the depth of our poverty, our dependence, and our need as creatures for what only our Creator can provide.

We are not self-sufficient. Self-reliance is a myth. God meets our every need ... and meets it generously.

Psalms 145.16

You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

I Timothy 6.17

God ... richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment

In the face of our need God is lavish in his love, giving all that we need and so much more besides. It doesn't always come when we want it, or in the way we might want it, as we'll explore in a few weeks, but it always comes.

The abundance of God's gifts to us reflects not only the generosity of the Giver but also the abundance of our poverty as the recipients. As Jesus says to the church in Laodicea,

Revelation 3.17-18

You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched and pitiful, for you are poor, blind and naked."

He alone has, he alone provides, he alone is, everything we need. As he goes on to say in Revelation 3.18:

You are poor. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich. You are naked; let me give you white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness. And you are blind. I offer you salve to put on your eyes, so you can truly see.

When we look back over our shoulders at the days and years past, we see countless evidences of his riches meeting us again and again at the point of our poverty, our every need being met in lavish and overflowing ways by the loving Giver.

* * *

If a life of gratitude begins with seeing everything as gift, where should we begin to look for God's provision?

What does Scripture tell us? Where should we look for his gifts? What are we on the receiving end of?

We are prompted to see the ways that God provides nothing less than every single necessity for life.

Matthew 5.45

Your Father in heaven ... causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

This passage in Matthew's gospel is especially striking, both for what it says about the lavishness of God's provision and for what it says about how that provision is so lavishly poured out on all – even on those who completely disqualify themselves from it.

The more I've meditated on this passage in the last few years, the more striking it is to me.

When Jesus speaks here of God causing the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the deserving and the undeserving alike, this is what's known as a synecdoche. It's a figure of speech that lets a few aspects of something represent the whole of the thing, like calling your car your wheels, or radioing in from the battlefield a request for more boots on the ground, or asking for a woman's hand in marriage.

Think about what is included when you talk about the sun shining. Apart from a few rare exceptions such as those odd plants living near deep sea vents under the ocean, plant life is impossible without the light of the sun, which means animal life is all but impossible too.

And think of what is included in rain falling. Same thing. Without water, life is impossible for every single plant and animal on the planet. And without plants and animals, human beings have no food.

Jesus isn't just saying there are a couple of thoughtful gifts that God has given to all human beings. Jesus is saying that every single thing that is necessary to sustain human life God provides generously to every human being.

We don't get our food from grocery stores. We don't get our water from faucets. We don't get the means to support our families from our jobs. Not ultimately. Everything we need for life ultimately comes from the hand of God.

Try the experiment of tracing something you own – anything – back to its source. Say, a down coat. Synthetic material made from plastics, which come from crude oil or natural gas or coal, which comes from the earth, which God created, or made from bioplastics, which come from starch, or vegetable fats, or vegetable oil, which come from plants, which were created by God to cover the earth. And down feathers, which come from ducks and geese, which were created by God. And the whole garment, creatively developed using the intelligence and creativity given us by God, in imitation of God's own clothing of the birds of the air.

Jesus is saying here the same thing Paul says to the people of Athens in Acts 17, that God himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

Acts 17.24-25

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth . . . He himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

God provides everything necessary for life. And that doesn't just include food and drink. The necessities for life include God's provision for our relational needs.

God says in Genesis 1, in the creation account, that it is not good for us to be alone, so God provides for our relational needs as well, surrounding us with others to love and to be loved by.

Throughout Scripture we are led to see other people as gifts to us from a God who loves us. For example, Paul often celebrates his fellow human beings and his fellow followers of Christ among the greatest of gifts from God's hand for which to give God thanks.

For instance, in I Thessalonians 1.2, he writes:

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

But the lavish love of God stretches even beyond those things we need for meaningful physical existence and includes all of the ways that God meets our every spiritual need.

Ephesians 1.3

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Hebrews 12.28-29

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.

Bringing us alive to himself. Drawing our hearts toward him. Convicting us of our sin and our need for God. Bringing us to faith. Putting his spirit in us. Making us a part of the believing community. Beginning to form the likeness of Jesus in us. And so much more.

Including the greatest of all God's gifts, which is the gift of himself. The psalmist in Psalm 16 says,

Psalm 16.2

I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."

Psalm 16.5

Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup.

God made us for himself, so he himself is both our greatest need and his greatest gift.

As the great devotional writer Catherine of Siena says,

O abyss! O Eternal Godhead! O deep sea!
What more could you have given me than the gift of your very self?
The Dialogue (1347-1380)

* * *

As we begin this new year, let's give ourselves as a church family to forming the habit of a heart of gratitude.

They say that it takes about 66 days to form a new habit. The seven weeks of this sermon series will give us a good start.

Here are two ways we want to help you develop a heart of gratitude as we come into the new year together.

First, we know that many of you already have your own journals. But if you don't happen to have one, we have journals available for you this morning in The Landing.

So grab your own, or if you don't have one you can use grab one of ours, and we'd like you to put it on your table or your night stand, and commit to writing a paragraph, or just a sentence, or even just a word or a phrase, at the end of each day, thanking God for how he met you.

In December I was blessed to share dinner with some dear friends who go back more than forty years in my life. One of them told me that she realized that she walked through life with a grumpy outlook, so she decided last year to begin every day by looking back over the previous day and writing a paragraph of thanks in her journal. She said the difference it made in her outlook was profound.

So as a church family let's join in recording our thanks to God for the gifts we receive from him with each day that passes.

One more thought on that. I want to encourage you to write your note not to yourself but to *God*.

One of the important shifts that God invites us to in our worship life is to shift from "he is" language to "you are" language. Here's an example.

Psalm 136.1

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 9.1

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;
I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.

The first verse, Psalm 136.1, is "he is" language. This is what's true about him. It's in the third person. I'm speaking about him.

The second verse, Psalm 9.1, is second person language: "you are". I'm speaking to you. This is what's true about *you*.

In every worship service we pray that every worshiper will make the turn at some point from "he is" to "you are" worship, not just remembering what's true about him, but bringing our adoration and praise directly to him. You are good. You are holy. You are loving. You are worthy.

Toward that end, we want to encourage you to write Psalm 9.1 in the front of your journal, and then to express your gratitude each day directly to him.

Lord, you gave me the gift of a beautiful sunset today.
 Thank you, Lord, for that deeply encouraging conversation with my daughter this morning.
 Lord, you gave me the chance to share my faith with my neighbor. Thank you.

Second, we have bookmarks for you to stick in your journals. On the back, they have one of my favorite lines from George Herbert:

Thou that hast giv'n so much to me,
 Give one thing more, a grateful heart.

George Herbert, "Gratefulnesse"

Isn't that great? It's a great prayer for us to be praying every time we pick up our bibles or our journals. Let's have that be our prayer as we come into the new year.

* * *

As we close, think back on that list of circumstances in which you find yourself as you end one year and begin another.

Now turn your gaze just for a moment and look back at the days and the years that have led up to today. Begin to notice and name the ways God has shown himself faithful in your yesterdays.

For all that has been—thanks!

And now turn again and look at what lies before you. God will be faithful in your todays and tomorrows. Entrust yourself to him anew.

To all that will be—yes!