



## “Gratitude: 4. Gratitude in Action”

Texts: Proverbs 11:24-31 and Romans 12:9-13

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We’ve been talking about gratitude all this month at First Pres, and we’re concluding this series of sermons this morning with what, I hope, is a logical final step. We began by considering the fact that gratitude is a feeling - an emotion. Diana Butler Bass, whose book, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, has informed our sermon series, tells us gratitude is formed of three things. The first is situation. The situation in life matters. Secondly, gratitude is that combination of emotions that weave together to form gratitude: from relief, appreciation, and release, to surprise, wonder, and awe, and even gladness and joy. Third and finally, gratitude is a typically unplanned response. We can’t calculate it or fake it. These three elements show us that gratitude is the recognition of a circumstance, event, or situation that we receive as a gift - something from which we gain benefit - something that surprises us - something that we could not plan or manufacture - and we respond with strong emotions.

We went on to say that gratitude - like any other spiritual discipline - is a holy habit. In order for gratitude to become a holy habit, we need to increase our awareness of the blessings that fill our lives and we need to become more keenly aware of those moments when the emotion of gratitude manifests itself in our hearts. Awareness of what is happening in our lives and how we are responding - or not responding - is essential.

Last week, we considered the force for good that is created when a group of people experience and express their gratitude. Gratitude is part of our lives as individuals *and* as a community. And when God’s people express their gratitude, the world begins to change.

All of that brings us to this final sermon in the series: Gratitude in Action. What happens when our gratitude moves from an emotion within us to an expression outside of us? When we become aware of our gratitude - individually and corporately - how do we convey that gratitude in word and action? How do we move our gratitude from within to beyond ourselves?

We need to do a little work before we can answer those questions.

In the stories of creation, that mark the beginnings of scripture, it is clear that God made all that was. That means that God owned it all. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it..." the Psalmist declared. (Ps 24:1) And God made us stewards - managers - of everything in the world of God's creating: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Gen.1:26) When we understood and saw ourselves are stewards of creation and all that God has made - when we understood and saw ourselves as the managers of the marvels of God's handiwork - God's created world thrived. John Wesley famously instructed his parishioners: [to] "gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can" because "all that we have is given by God, and since we have been entrusted with these possessions, we are responsible to use them in ways that bring Him glory."<sup>1</sup>

But, over time, a change in understanding came into being. The change was that God's people became convinced that we owned everything we called our own. Soon, stewardship - managing God's resources - became *philanthropy* - helping others with *our* possessions. Now, there's nothing wrong with *philanthropy*, but don't call it *stewardship*. *Philanthropy* assumes that we, not God, own our resources and that we, not God, have the sole authority to disperse them.

So, there is an important distinction we need to make. Do we believe that God is the maker of all things and the source of all things and the possessor of all things? Or do we believe that what we have is ours and we can do with it as we please? Are we who we are because of God's grace and love? Or are we self-made and the result of our own hard work? If we are the source of all our blessings, then we are grateful to ourselves. If God is the source of our life and blessings, then we are called to be grateful to God.

If you take a look at the last 50 years or so of life in American culture, you see a fairly continuous climb in prosperity and wealth. Most of us are "better off" (whatever that means and however you measure it) than our grandparents. That increase in wealth carries with it a corresponding increase in our obsession with "stuff" - as George Carlin called it. In our culture, church folk have seen their wealth increase and their "stuff" increase, so that you really can't tell church folk from non-church folk.

But here's something interesting. In a report entitled, *The State of Church Giving*, John and Sylvia Ronsvalle explain, "Giving has not kept up with income...In 1933, the depth of the Great Depression, [per capita giving] was 3.2%. In 1995...it was still 3%. By 2004, when Americans were over 555% richer after taxes and inflation than in the Great Depression, Protestants were giving 2.5% of their income to churches."<sup>2</sup>

So, in a time and in a culture where the accumulation of “more” is the goal, God’s people have adopted the miserly patterns of the culture. We’re in this business of life for the expressed purpose of getting more. There is a familiar quote, sometimes attributed to J. Paul Getty, at other times to John D. Rockefeller - who really knows - but the question put to the kabillionaire was, “How much is enough?” The response - reportedly - was “one dollar more.” In every respect, it doesn’t matter who said it - we all are tempted to live by that sentiment.

We know that in our time and culture, being authentically Christian is counter-cultural. What Jesus calls us to do goes against the grain of what passes for acceptable in our world. If you don’t think that’s true, let’s talk after worship.

So, in a world and in a culture where the accumulation of more is the goal, God in Jesus Christ calls us to put our gratitude into generous action. God calls us to live a life in which gratitude is put into action through generosity and kindness and compassion. God calls us to live a life in which the need of the other is as real to us as any need we may experience.

In the collection of the Proverbs, the wisdom of ancient Israel is shared with successive generations. In these brief, pithy statements, we gain insight into how God’s people are called to live their lives in relation with God and with each other. They’re brilliant:

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;  
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.

A generous person will be enriched,  
and one who gives water will get water.

The people curse those who hold back grain,  
but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it.

Whoever diligently seeks good seeks favor,  
but evil comes to the one who searches for it.

Those who trust in their riches will wither,  
but the righteous will flourish like green leaves.

They reach out and grab us. They’re like the slips of paper in the fortune cookie.

Now, I don’t know how to make fortune cookies, but I can give it to you this way...

“Those who despise their neighbors are sinners,  
but happy are those who are kind to the poor.” - Proverbs 12:21

“Wealth brings many friends,  
but the poor are left friendless.” - Proverbs 19:4

“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord,  
and will be repaid in full.” - Proverbs 19:17

“The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.” - Proverbs 22:2

“The rich rules over the poor,  
and the borrower is the slave of the lender.  
Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,  
and the rod of anger will fail.  
Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.” – Proverbs 22:7-9

“Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;  
for the Lord pleads their cause  
and despoils the life of those who despoil them.” – Proverbs 22:22-23

“Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing,  
but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse.” – Proverbs 29:27

When writing to the Roman Christians, the Apostle Paul reminded them: Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic - be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home.

The lesson? When we feel gratitude – and our gratitude is genuine – one of the principle ways gratitude finds expression is in generosity.

And there is the answer to the question with which we began this sermon. What happens when our gratitude moves from an emotion within us to an expression outside of us? When we become aware of our gratitude – individually and corporately – how do we convey that gratitude in word and action? How do we move our gratitude from within to beyond ourselves?

When we put gratitude into action, it is best expressed in generosity. Part of that image of God in which you and I are created has something to do with generosity – with giving beyond ourselves – with caring and feeling compassion toward those in need. It was John Bunyan who reminded us: “You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.” That statement could have been made by God. What can we do to repay God for the care and compassion and comforts we have received? Nothing. Nothing at all.

But a step in the right direction is to put our gratitude into action. A step in the right direction is to allow the self-giving, generous image of God to be seen in us. The example is before us – in God's own giving.

May our generosity express our gratitude in action. For now and evermore. Amen.

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1.) as quoted in *Revolution in Generosity: Transforming Stewards to Be Rich Toward God*, ed. Wesley K. Willmer, p.28

2.) *Ibid.*, p. 26