



11.2.25 Feeling Grateful | 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

Is it possible to be grateful for being ungrateful?

I should probably explain. About ten years ago I was grateful for how God helped me begin to see, gave me the self-awareness of my own ingratitude.

I looked inward and realized my heart was in general not grateful but bitter. And this bothered me in a good way.

Since childhood, I have struggled with being grateful. My mom made me write “thank you’s” for all the birthday and Christmas gifts I received. How about you, did your mom do the same? I didn’t know what to say!

Then as a young adult, in my on-going struggle with gratitude and ingratitude, I loved all the “Thank you” notes I’d see in stores. So beautiful!

Inspired! I bought many sets of beautiful “Thank you” cards, bought a book called Finding the Right Words to know what to write, I even pre-addressed and stamped some cards.

All I needed was the right tools! Now I was equipped. Let the gratitude flow!

But it didn’t flow.

And here are most of my unsent “Thank you” cards.

So, the only reason I can in any way be grateful for being ungrateful, is to experience how God has worked gratitude into my life over the years. I’m grateful God is still working on me!

God also led me to Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks, that Amy Austin mentioned earlier. Where Diana Butler Bass humorously writes about her own struggles with gratitude. I heartily recommend it.

She even wrote about a particular Thanksgiving ritual she tried once. Maybe you've heard of it or even practice it as a family? You go round the table and, "share one thing you are grateful to God for this past year BEFORE you can eat" ritual.

Diana said this is a bit of a holiday hostage situation. Seriously, how sincere or authentic would you be when faced with all that food!?

We start a new sermon series today, **Cultivating a Grateful Heart**. For many years now, I've been wanting to preach on gratitude for all of November, as a build up to Thanksgiving Day! It just seems to make a whole lot of sense.

What prompted Diana Butler Bass to write a whole book on gratitude? As she was contemplating her failures in the gratitude department, she was also thumbing through a survey in 2015, *American Religion and Spirituality*, when this question, that we asked earlier/asked in 9:00am service caught her eye.

**How often do you feel a STRONG SENSE of gratitude or thankfulness? Would you say at least once a week, once or twice a month, several times a year, seldom or never?**

So, we did our own survey on that question. And our combined total was: \_\_\_\_.

Bass was shocked at the survey's results: an astonishing 78% of Americans responded by saying that they had felt strongly thankful in the last week!

At first, she felt like more of a failure than ever because she didn't see herself in that 78%. But then she started questioning the results. Because from her perspective those 8 out of 10 people do not seem that grateful?

One of her friends, a sociologist by trade, chuckled and replied to her that whenever 80% of the people answer the same way on a question, that more than likely "social bias" is happening.

"Social bias" is when people answer a question in a way that makes them look good to themselves or to others. We know gratitude is good and want to be seen as grateful and virtuous. But inwardly we realize how difficult it is to practice and sustain thanksgiving, and how hard it is to live a truly grateful life.

If that's true, Bass felt like she had identified a problem. She was seeing something she called a "gratitude gap", a seeming disparity between our private feelings and our public attitudes.

Because, only a week later that same year, the *Public Religion Research Institute* posted in 2015 a very different study regarding American attitudes.

At that time, Bass noted our nation was moving into another presidential election, that study discovered that Americans were more anxious, less optimistic, and more distrustful than ever.

Subsequent political events revealed a surge of rage, revealed a toxic level of anger, fear, division and intolerance in the American electorate.

Feels even more true 10 years later in 2025.

So, did the same people who felt grateful also express these negative emotions? Had they divided their lives into personal thanks and public discontent and even rage? Seems to be a big disconnect going on.

### **(Slide of Me and We)**

Two dynamics around gratitude arise.

The first dynamic is personal, involves me. Why is it hard to practice gratitude in meaningful and sustained ways? Many may feel grateful, but they are equally aware of the difficulty in expressing thanks to family, friends and kind strangers.

Gratitude can be challenging.

The second dynamic involves “we”. What might it mean to live together as a thankful society?

As human beings, we possess an intuitive awareness that we depend on others to survive. We are safer and happier when we care for each other in community, when we do things for each other, if we recognize mutuality, we experience gratitude as central to civic life.

When we work together, when we share and when we care, there's enough for all. We appreciate each other for what we will what we all contribute to the flourishing of community. We appreciate one another for the good gifts of life.

Whether you write a thank you note to grandma might not matter as much as we think. Rather what does matter is how we appreciate the ties that bind us as a larger society. That matters greatly to everyone. But, keep writing thank yous to grandma too.

In November 2015 both surveys measured something true. One survey measured private gratitude, the other measured the absence of communal gratefulness.

I appreciate it when someone does me a favor or gives me a gift. I feel strongly grateful when something good happens to me.

At the same time, however, as a society, we are being driven by the opposite impulse.

We have a sense of powerlessness that comes from thinking we will never have what we deserve or want. We are held captive by dissatisfaction that just seems increasingly toxic.

This is the gratitude gap, a very real disconnect between the me and the we.

So, what can we do? Because even the most grateful of us cannot survive long or stay afloat in such turmoil and toxicity. Can we clean up this mess? Or is it too much to hope we can turn things around or even make a dent? What's realistic?

I came across a phrase this past week that I had never heard before, but it struck a chord with me.

I was reading about a different concern and someone was warning against something they called the "sunshine gospel". "The Sunshine Gospel" is the temptation to move too quickly past pain — to gloss over struggle with a smile and put too much of a positive spin on things.

With the sunshine gospel, it's easy to lean on cheerful clichés: *God will help us! Everything happens for a reason! It could be worse!*

But sometimes, that kind of faith feels too sweet — too easy — almost too good to be true.

But there are no quick fixes, no silver bullets, no 10 easy steps to living with more gratitude. We know that.

Our text this morning might even seem too "sunshiny"... **"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."** From 1 Thessalonians.

But maybe Paul isn't calling us to a "sunshine gospel" after all. Maybe he's not telling us to *pretend* everything is good, or to be thankful *for* everything that happens. He's reminding us to be thankful *in* everything that happens, not thankful *for* everything. And that's a very different thing.

We're not called to give thanks *for* the illness, or the loss, or the disappointment. We don't thank God *for* the broken relationship or the empty chair at the table. That would be dishonest and weird. God never asks us to deny reality.

What Scripture calls us to is gratitude *in* all things: to look for God's presence and grace *within* the circumstances, not because of them.

To be thankful *in* all things means we believe that even in the hardest seasons, God is still at work. It means we can say, "This hurts—but God is here."

It means we can pray, "I don't understand—but I trust You."

Gratitude in all things is not about ignoring pain; it's about refusing to let pain have the final word. Refusing to allow pain to shut down our faith.

Paul isn't pushing positivity. He's inviting perspective. He's reminding us that joy and sorrow can coexist, that prayer and gratitude are not replacements for honesty, but companions in it.

And I see that Paul is also inviting us to be self-disciplined — to *practice* this mindset of gratitude in all circumstances. Therefore, gratitude isn't based on feelings.

It's not something that simply happens to us when life is good; it's something we *choose* and *cultivate*, especially when life feels uncertain, unfair, or unfinished.

This month, as we move toward Thanksgiving, I want to invite you to join me in putting that kind of gratitude into practice — not just in our hearts, but together as a church family.

I invite us to do the work of cultivating gratitude, putting in some effort.

Our Worship Design Team has created this beautiful cornucopia here on the back wall of the sanctuary — a symbol of abundance and blessing. Just amazing!

Each Sunday in November, at the close of worship, we invite you to come forward and jot down a word or two of something you're grateful for — a name of a friend or family member, even one who has passed away, a moment, a blessing, even a lesson learned in difficulty — and tape it to the cornucopia.

Week by week, we will watch it fill and overflow with the thanksgiving of this community.

By the end of the month, we'll see a wonderful visible reminder of God's goodness among us. Our own artwork, or tapestry of gratitude that tells the story of how God is at work in our lives.

Again, it is not a quick fix or a band aid, it won't solve all our problems. But it is a start. And any good start is something to be thankful for. Amen.

Time of Reflection:

- 1. Where have you noticed a “gratitude gap” in your own life — between what you feel privately and what you express outwardly?**  
*(What might it look like for God to begin closing that gap this week?)*
- 2. How can you practice being thankful *in* all circumstances — not for everything that happens, but within whatever you're facing right now?**  
*(What might gratitude look like in the middle of your current season?)*