

What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Thankfulness

It is one of those days! When you leave the house in a hurry, your car will not start. After a crowded bus ride one of your colleagues meets you at the door to the building and tells you how one of the nationals has been lying about you. When you open your door, the office is a mess because someone had broken in during the night and trashed it looking for valuables that were not there. A few minutes later your spouse calls to say that two of your kids just woke up with high fevers.

Looking for some sympathy and encouragement, you approached a friend and began to tell what had happened. Before you could finish, your friend said: “Remember that Paul, an early cross-cultural worker, wrote to the people in one of his churches, ‘Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.’” When you protested that Paul could not have really meant that, your friend pointed out that earlier in the sentence Paul said, “Be joyful always” (1 Thessalonians 1:16-18).

You began to ask questions. Why be thankful? What if I don’t feel like I have anything to be thankful for? Whom do I thank? What else does the Bible say? Let us consider these questions and more.

Why be thankful?

Of course, one answer to that question is that the Bible says so. However, in recent years Robert Emmons, one of the leading scholars in positive psychology, and his

colleagues have studied the effect of gratitude on individuals. They have found that gratitude, wanting what you have, can measurably change people’s lives for the better. Thankful people have the following characteristics.

- More alert and enthusiastic
- More determined and attentive
- More energetic and optimistic
- More progress toward goals
- More exercise and better sleep
- More forgiving and helpful to others
- Higher immune response/less illness
- Closer family ties
- Less stress and envy
- Less resentment and greed
- Less bitterness and depression

What does the Bible say?

The Bible has dozens of references to thankfulness, often several in a single chapter.

- “...give thanks to the Lord...” (Psalm 107:1, 8, 15, 21, 31).
- “...give thanks to the Lord...” (Psalm 118:1, 19, 29).
- “...give you (God) thanks...” (Psalm 118: 21, 28).
- “...give thanks to the Lord...” (Psalm 136:1, 3).
- “...give thanks to the God of...” (Psalm 136:2, 26).

Since Paul was across-cultural worker, what did he say in addition to telling people to give thanks in all circumstances? He was most often thankful for the nationals, even though they were far from perfect.

- For the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:2): “We always thank God for all of you.”

- For the Philippians (1:3): “I thank my God every time I remember you.”
- For the Colossians (1:3): “We always thank God...when we pray for you.”
- For the Ephesians (1:16): “I have not stopped giving thanks for you.”
- Even for the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:4): “I always thank God for you.”

What does it mean to be thankful?

Being thankful means much more than children writing obligatory thank-you notes to Grandma for their birthday presents because their mothers insisted (Grandma may not give such a nice one next year). It is also more than the warm feelings one has upon receiving a gift.

When people are grateful, they recognize that the benefit they received was not earned or deserved; it was given freely by someone out of love or compassion. The word “gratitude” comes from the Latin *gratus*, from which we also get the theological term “grace.” When people say that they have received something by the grace of God, they know that they did nothing to deserve it, that it was given out of God’s love and care for them. The same is true when people give.

Unfortunately, most people have high expectations and take things for granted. When something good happens, they tend to assume they are responsible for it, that they earned it or at least deserved it because of who they are or what they have done.

Gratitude researchers point out that being thankful involves recognition and acknowledgment.

- Recognition. This means that people must literally re-cognize, that is, think differently about something. For example, they may have resented

something that caused suffering, but they re-cognize the adversity to see that it resulted in growth that would have not been possible any other way.

- Acknowledgement. In addition to thinking about adversity differently, people must accept the good in their lives and affirm that there are good and enjoyable things in the world. They must have the humility to agree that they did nothing to earn or deserve the good that has come their way. Someone has purposely been kind to them, and that kindness has really helped them.

For example, losing jobs may force people into new vocations that are wonderful opportunities, but they have to recognize that fact to be thankful, to realize that they have received a benefit. Illnesses may prevent people from accomplishing some things but may also push them into other pursuits that are much better.

What if I feel like I have nothing to be thankful for?

This is a question most often asked by people who live in affluence. They are people who fail to see the splendor of the rainbows through the rain or the beauty of the “weeds” in their lawns.

This “poverty of affluence” results from two things. First, people adapt to a culture of plenty, and then they need more to make them feel “thankful.” Of course, soon after they get “more,” they want even more. Second, people tend to compare themselves with neighbors who have even more. This comparison makes them feel like they have so little there is nothing to be thankful for. Again as soon as they get what one neighbor has, they compare themselves to a different neighbor, and they are again dissatisfied.

People who are alive and have basic needs met have much to be thankful for. They just need to re-cognize and acknowledge their situation

What can I do?

People cannot conjure up true gratitude at a moment's notice. No one can try to be grateful and through willpower make it happen. An old saying states that "happiness pursued, eludes." However, people can develop habits that, over time, will result in the disposition of thankfulness.

The old hymn, "Count Your Blessings," is the answer. It says that when you are discouraged, in conflict, burdened, and see how much others have, you should "Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your many blessings, see what God has done." Here are some proven effective ways to do that.

- Keep a gratitude journal. Each day actually write down the gifts, grace, and good things you enjoy. There is no need to worry about spelling or punctuation or have a fancy journal. Actually writing them down is far more effective than just thinking about them.
- Thank God. The Bible is filled with prayers of thanksgiving in the Psalms and other places that you can pray to God yourself. Churches have ritual prayers of gratitude you may want to memorize. Conversational spontaneous prayers are also effective.
- Use your senses. Take time to attend to what you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Odors often take you back to earlier good times. Songs bring back memories. Other sensations do the same.

- Take a walk of thanks. Walk through your neighborhood, your house, your school, or your church. What you see, hear, and smell will bring back memories.
- Watch your language. Depressed people often engage in negative self-talk. Thankful people engage in positive self-talk. You can change your attitude by changing what you say to yourself.
- Do something for others. When you do things that benefit others (for which they are grateful), you will find that you will become grateful yourself. Doing something for those who do not like us is particularly effective.
- Thank others. Gratitude is not just thoughts and emotions; it is actions as well. Verbally thank someone. Write a letter of thanks. Send an email of thanks.
- Make a gratitude visit. Deliver your letter of thanks in person rather than sending it through the mail.
- Make a gratitude phone call.

In all circumstances?

Paul actually lived what he wrote. In his letter to the Philippians the words *joy* and *rejoice* occur fourteen times in the four chapters. He wrote that letter from prison while awaiting a trial which could result in his death.

From his cell Paul wrote, "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want (Philippians 4:11-12).

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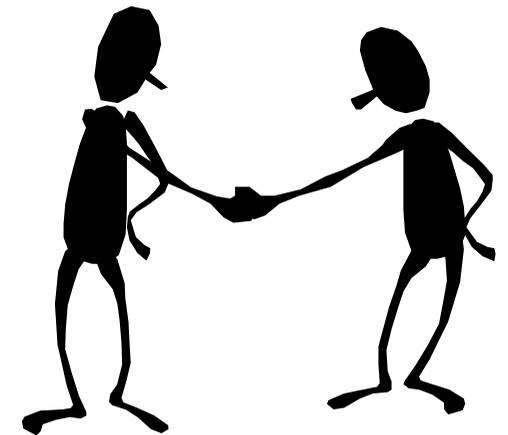
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