

In his book, *The Rest of God*, Mark Buchanan (**picture**) writes, “In Guelph, Ontario, there’s a riverside park landmarked with large and intricate sculptures: a dinosaur, a man riding a bicycle, a child and his mother. But these are no ordinary sculptures. Each is made from the debris collected from the riverbed. Every year, the city drains the river...then invites people from the community to scour the river’s muddy floor and clean up the garbage scattered along it. A welter of refuse is dredged up: shopping carts, tires and rims, car hoods, baby strollers, bikes and trikes, engine blocks, rakes and shovels, urinals, copper plumbing, wine bottles, shoes, and thousands of pop cans. Mountains and mountains of rust-cabbed rubbish, slick with algae, are hauled out.

Rather than truck all this garbage off to a landfill, the city calls its sculptors together...Each artist is given a mound of junk and commissioned to make from it beauty. The created works are then showcased along the very river from which the raw materials have come.

God does that. He works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called to His purposes. He takes junk and sculpts art. And the primary way we participate in that is thanksgiving. Be thankful in all things. Be thankful for all things.”

God wants us to be thankful people. Are you a thankful Christian? Have you taught your children to express gratitude? Just as parents want their children to become grateful people, God wants us to have grateful hearts.

Over and over again in Scripture He teaches us lessons on the importance of authentic gratitude. The Bible tells us that the ability to express gratitude and offer heartfelt praise and thanksgiving is a fundamental sign of spiritual wholeness. Repeatedly the psalmists write, “God, let me live that I might praise You.”

One of the psalmists that God has used to teach this vital life lesson is the author of Psalm 136—the one we’re looking at this morning. He lists several of the ways God has blessed us. Please turn to Psalm 136 (p. 520).

This psalm tell us that God created the universe for us to enjoy. He gave us the blessing of day and night...time to work and time to rest. He delivered Israel from slavery, destroyed their enemies and led them to the Promised Land. He provides for our needs of food...and so on.

Then, in the way the psalmist structures this psalm it seems like a question is implied: “What do you say?”, because it’s an antiphonal psalm.

Antiphonal music is music performed by two choirs in interaction, often singing alternate musical phrases. Antiphonal psalmody is the singing of psalms by alternating groups of performers. The expected response to each of these blessings is a thankful acknowledgment that each one is another reminder of God’s enduring love. So, please follow the screens and let’s read this Psalm aloud together *antiphonally*.

I’ll read the blessing statement and “What do you say?” **“FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER.”**

- 1 – Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER.*
- 2 – Give thanks to the God of gods. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 3 – Give thanks to the Lord of lords: *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 4 – to Him Who alone does great wonders, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 5 – to Him Who by understanding made the heavens, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 6 – to Him Who spread out the earth above the waters, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 7 – to Him Who made the great lights— *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 8 – the sun to rule over the day, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 9 – the moon and stars to rule over the night; *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 10 – to Him Who struck down the firstborn of Egypt. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 11 – and brought Israel out from among them. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 12 – with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 13 – to Him Who divided the Red Sea in two. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 14 – and made Israel pass through the midst of it, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 15 – but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea; *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 16 – to Him Who led His people through the wilderness; *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 17 – to Him Who struck down great kings, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 18 – and killed mighty kings— *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 19 – Sihon, king of the Amorites. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 20 – and Og, king of Bashan— *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 21 – and gave their land as a heritage, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*
- 22 – a heritage to Israel His servant, *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*

23 – It is He Who remembered us in our low estate. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*

24 – and rescued us from our foes. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*

25 – He gives food to all flesh. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*

26 – Give thanks to the God of Heaven. *FOR HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!*

Before we go any further, let's try to define gratitude. At the onset we have to understand that gratitude is much more than an attitude. Gratitude is one of the great secrets to being abundantly joyful in life.

I like what John Ortberg (**pictures**) says in his book, *It All Goes Back in the Box*: “Gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift. It opens us up to wonder, delight, and humility. It makes our hearts generous. It liberates us from the prison of self-preoccupation. Gratitude is not something we give to God because He wants to make sure we know how much trouble He went to over us. Gratitude is the gift God gives us that enables us to be blessed by all His other gifts, the way our taste buds enable us to enjoy the gift of food. Without gratitude our lives degenerate into envy, dissatisfaction, and complaints, taking what we have for granted and always wanting more.”

His words remind us that one reason it's so important for us to develop grateful hearts is because of the *alternative*. I'm referring to the other kind of heart—the heart that's chronically discontented, complaining, judgmental and dissatisfied. It's the heart of a person who lives with a demanding spirit, without any sense of awe or wonder. It's the person who lives with a sense of entitlement.

Ingratitude makes our hearts grow smaller, harder and colder day after day. It's a miserable way to live. If we're honest, some of us would have to say, “*There are too many times when I allow my heart to become like that. Too often I let it become ungrateful. I often see myself as a victim. There is a bitterness and entitlement about me at times.*”

How do we keep that kind of thinking from finding a permanent place in our lives? How do we cultivate grateful hearts? How can we work toward **Gratitude begins with attitude**? Let me share **several exercises** that I think will help, things that combine to make us into more thankful people.

We must learn to appreciate imperfect gifts. *Have you ever received an imperfect gift?* Every hand should be up because we all do. Imperfection is everywhere. If you're married and are sitting beside your spouse today, you're sitting next to an imperfect gift. Go ahead. Take a look at that “gift” if you want to. Look at him or her. Right now you're looking at an imperfect gift. As you look into each other's eyes you can “Amen” each other because you're both imperfect gifts!

Our kids and our grandkids are precious gifts about which we should be incredibly grateful but they're not perfect.

Your body is a gift. How many here have a perfect body? Raise your hand. Good—no hands—you're learning. How many of you live in a perfect house? Work at the perfect job? Have clothes that always fit perfectly? Eat perfect food? Have ever gotten a perfect haircut? Have perfect friends? Have a perfect church or pastor?

You get the point. We're fallen people living in a fallen world. We're imperfect beings surrounded by imperfection and must learn to be grateful, grateful for imperfect things like our spouse, kids, body, home, friends, work and our life. This is foundational in learning to cultivate a grateful heart for a couple reasons.

No matter how “imperfect” your life is, there are other people in this world whose lives are less perfect than yours. One single Mom (**picture**) wrote: “*I have learned to thank God for what we humans think of as ‘the basics.’ I thank Him for my sight to see the beautiful paintings He creates every morning when I take my son to school. I thank Him for allowing me to have 2 hands and 2 feet, I thank Him for these things because I know that there are people without ‘the basic’ gifts which are often taken for granted. I thank Him for the roof He has put over my head and for a son who rarely gets sick. Yes I complain at times of achy feet or being sick, not having enough money to pay this or that, and the list goes on, but almost always I'm reminded that somewhere someone would be not just content, but overjoyed just by having the [imperfect] life I have.*”

Now that's a grateful heart! This single Mom realizes that many people in the world would consider her imperfect life far more “perfect” than theirs.

We must choose to be grateful for imperfect gifts because of the false belief that perfect circumstances will produce lasting joy. Too many times people think, “If I just have enough good things happen to me I'll be happy.” Life never works that way. Some of the most unhappy, ungrateful hearts beat inside people who had what we'd define as “perfect” lives. They had almost literally everything this world has to offer but were miserable. Happiness is not related to circumstances.

Christian joy is not a feeling, it's a choice! Philippians 4:4 commands us, “*Rejoice in the Lord always.*” Not sometimes. But some will immediately respond, “How can I possibly be always joyful with the hurts, pains and difficulties that God has allowed to enter my life?” That's a fair question but God has a good answer.

We must make a distinction between joy and happiness. Happiness is dependent on external circumstances, while joy is internal, a result of being controlled by the Spirit. Some consider happiness to be a feeling dependent on circumstances and usually restricted to times when life is going well. Joy though is an inner serenity of the soul, rooted in a decision to trust God's faithfulness, regardless of what's happening externally.

There's a wonderful story about Nathaniel Hawthorne (**picture**). One day he came home heartbroken, feeling like a failure because he'd been fired from his job. His wife responded: "Now you can write your book!" "What are we going to live on in the meantime?" asked her husband. Then, she pulled out a substantial amount of money, and said, "I have always known you were a man of genius. I knew that someday you would write a masterpiece. So every week, out of the money you gave me for housekeeping, I saved a little bit. Here is enough to last us for a whole year." Greeting her husband's apparent defeat with joy, optimism and expectancy, the door was opened for him to write one of the greatest novels of American literature, *The Scarlet Letter* (**picture**).

The Lord Jesus serves this function in the lives of believers. He greets us with surprising resources to cope when our own reservoirs are empty, when we face problems and there seem to be no solutions. We can do anything God wants us to do through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13).

This means that we can choose to be grateful when your child tries to make her bed but the sheet is still sticking out. It means we can choose to be grateful when your husband tries to help you by making dinner but burns the rice. It means we can choose to be grateful when you have to drive an old imperfect junker of a car. It means we can choose to be grateful when you look in the mirror and see a body that is wrinklier and lumpier than we'd like it to be. It means we can choose to be grateful when your health is not good, but you have a good doctor to care for you.

Researchers have concluded that grateful people experience what they call a low threshold of gratitude. In the same way that a whisper has to reach a certain decibel level before we can hear it, goodness has to reach a certain experiential level before we perceive it. Yet, just as some of us are hard of hearing, some are "hard of thanking. How sad that it can take a gift of epic proportions (winning the lottery, getting a new car) before we actually feel grateful. Those with a high capacity for thankfulness, on the other hand, have a low threshold for gratitude. For them a sunset or a smile from a friend can set off a sense that they've been blessed by a gift they didn't earn. Those who have grateful hearts have developed a low threshold of gratitude and learned to appreciate imperfection. They've learned to see God's goodness even in things that are less than good—less than perfect.

To grow in gratefulness, we must learn to appreciate times of anxiety and frustration. That may seem a bit counterintuitive but there's a link between anxiety and gratitude. Let me share a couple illustrations to show you what I mean.

Let's say you find a lump somewhere on your body and are filled with anxiety. You go in for tests and the word comes back from the doctor that everything is OK. It's a benign growth. You're filled with gratitude when he says this, but you wouldn't be if you hadn't experienced the anxiety of the moment first. Nothing has changed from how it was a few weeks ago, except that anxiety has taught you that what you once took for granted is a wonderful gift. You're filled with gratitude that you have this gift.

When our son, Ben, was about six, we went with some friends to the Mall of America. We were in line for Camp Snoopy, turned our heads for a moment and Ben was gone. We looked everywhere. Jane and I panicked. We thought surely someone had taken our son when we weren't looking.

I'm in a total frenzy when I find him way back in the line behind us. When we finally found I'm angry because I'm so terrified, but then there was this other part of me that was so grateful—so relieved—because it had been a scary deal. That time of anxiety helped me be grateful for the safety of my little boy.

One of the foundations of gratitude is perspective. Nothing gives us perspective like tough times. Grateful people are people who learn to appreciate this principle. Maybe you've heard the story about a letter that a girl in college wrote to her parents? She wrote an e-mail and said:

"Dear Mom and Dad, I have so much to tell you. First, because of the fire in my dorm that was started by the student riots, I experienced temporary lung damage and had to go to the hospital. While I was there, I fell in love with an orderly. We have moved in together. I dropped out of school when I found out that I was pregnant. Then he got fired because of his drinking, so we are going to move to Alaska where we might get married after the birth of the baby." It was signed, "Your loving daughter."

But there was a "P.S." that said, "None of that really happened. I did flunk my chemistry class though—and wanted to help you to keep it in perspective." Smart kid! I bet if she applied her smarts to studying for chemistry as much as she did zapping her parents, she'd have done better!

So, learn to appreciate the anxious times of life. The perspective those times bring can become opportunities for us to be truly grateful.

Developing a grateful heart is found in learning to express gratitude openly and often. For some reason we open ourselves to gratitude when we express it, even if we don't feel it yet. There's just something about the way that God made us that makes this work. I don't understand why, but it works. Don't get me wrong. The feeling part of gratitude is important, but don't wait to feel thankful before giving thanks. Usually the thinking and the doing lead to the emotions—the feelings. C. S. Lewis (**picture**) once said that it's a thin line between pretending to feel something and beginning to feel it. Many times we cross that line into feeling gratitude when we simply express our thanks. Perhaps this is why they call that special Thursday in November *ThanksGIVING*, not *ThanksFEELING*.

Let's try this principle out for a few minutes. First, on a scale of 1-10 rate how grateful you feel at this moment. You might be having a hard time and be thinking, "I'm about a '3' right now." Or you might be at a "6.5" but be honest. Now, begin a list of the reasons you have to be thankful in life.

Complete this sentence as many times as you can for the next minute. ***"I am thankful for..."*** You could be thankful for your health or a person or a possession. For 60 seconds express your thanks for as many things or people or circumstances as you can. You can write your reasons for being thankful down or just make a mental list, but I'll tell you when to stop. Ready—set—go. (WAIT ONE MINUTE). Ok, now rate how grateful you feel from 1-10 again. How many got a higher gratitude rating now than you did a minute ago? (Show of hands please.) See what I mean!? We begin to *feel* more thankful as we *act* more thankful!

By the way—if you want to make someone's day—if you want to make them grateful for you—take a few minutes this afternoon to drop an e-mail or a snail-mail to people on that list you just made—the people you thanked God for. In your note, tell them you're grateful for them. It will encourage them! It will keep them going. It will help both your heart and their heart become more grateful. I promise! I'm continually amazed at the notes and of thanks that I receive like that. Let me share just one I received a few weeks ago (it made me spring a leak). (**Card from Sarah Smith**)

Don't get me wrong. I get other kinds of notes from time to time that aren't encouraging but I don't keep those. They don't make it into my "encouragement file." I do keep the others and sometimes when I feel down, I'll re-read one. As I read them I get the strength to keep on keeping on...and something else happens. I become more thankful!

Those with grateful hearts are people who've trained themselves to notice God's blessings, blessings that are all around us all the time. They keep a mental list of the evidence in their own lives of God's goodness and like the single mom I quoted earlier, they're able to see things to add to their list everywhere. We could say that ingratitude is a moral blindness. It's a blindness to the goodness of being alive, the beauty of creation, the love of friends and the joy of work—a blindness that makes it impossible for us to see all the evidences of God's great faithfulness.

Developing a grateful heart is found by committing to worshipping God. People with grateful hearts are those who realize that God is indeed the source of all the blessings of life, so they worship Him. They praise Him.

That's what the psalmist had in mind when he wrote this 136th psalm. His words are his own act of grateful worship. Let's look at that psalm again. Notice he begins by reminding his readers three times to "*Give thanks to the Lord*" and closes his worship psalm with the same admonition.

Here's a little Hebrew trivia. The phrase "*give thanks*" is best translated, "*gratefully acknowledge*" or "*thankfully express*." Those with grateful hearts, like this unknown psalmist, do this. They gratefully acknowledge God's goodness to them.

Here's a little more Hebrew trivia. The phrase, "*Praise the Lord*" is a translation of two Hebrew words, "*hallelu*" and "*ja*" which we transliterate into one word, "*Hallelujah!*" In Jewish tradition Psalm 136 has been called, "*The Great Hallel*" or "*The Great Psalm of Praise*."

You'll notice that while it does not use the phrase, "Praise the Lord," it's still given this designation because of the way it reminds the reader over and over and over again about the kinds of good gifts our Heavenly Father has showered on us. It's 26 verses of praising God—26 verses of worshipping Him for His enduring love.

People with grateful hearts—people like this psalmist—worship God all the time! Their lives are a long "*Great Hallel*" because they constantly praise Him for His goodness and greatness. They acknowledge Him as the Giver of every blessing of life.

Please understand. I'm not just talking about their involvement in corporate worship. No, people with grateful hearts are always giving thanks to God. They're always gratefully acknowledging His goodness, minute by minute, day by day. For them worship is a lifestyle.

Conclusion: Before we close let's try this exercise to develop grateful hearts together. Let's have a little "great Hallel time" of our own. Ready? Here goes! After each statement that I make say, ***"Thank You God!"***

When you lay down in a soft bed in a cool house in the summer and a soft bed in a warm house in the winter, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you look into the face of somebody who knows you and loves you anyway, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you eat something that tastes really good and you’re so glad for the gift of taste, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you tell your hand to do something and your hand does it, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you read a book and your mind is able to contemplate what you’re reading, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you sit in traffic because you’re blessed to have a job, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you look out the window and see the leaves falling or the snow falling, and remember the beauty of God’s creation, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you open this Book and read God saying to you, “I knit your body together in your mother’s womb before you were aware of anything, gave you the day of your birth, numbered the days of your life and counted the hairs on your head. I fed you just as I have fed little sparrows and clothed you just as I have clothed lilies in the field.” What do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you read that God sent His only Son to die for your sins so you wouldn’t have to, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

When you experience the abundant purposeful existence that comes from joining God in His work, what do you say? ***“Thank You God!”***

Let’s pray and thank God for His countless blessings.