

I wanted to start today by confessing to you about a bad habit that I have. I don't know about you, but I always start my day with the best of intentions. I do the laundry. I take it out of the dryer. I bring it upstairs and promise myself that I will fold it in a timely fashion. Then something happens. The phone will ring, or I will feel that there is a task more urgent that I need to complete and there sits the laundry basket full of clean clothes ready to be folded. This is one of my bad habits, we all have them. The good news for all of us is that bad habits can be changed with intentionality and practice.

In his book “A Complaint Free World” Will Bowen shares that “Scientists believe that it takes approximately twenty-one days of a consistent behavior for it to become habitual.”¹ As we continue to examine our spiritual lives, this fact gives us hope. This means that we can learn to live lives of gratitude for God.

Today we find ourselves in the third week of our “Gratitude Sermon Series.” The first week we agreed that we all complain and that we were willing to try to work on it. Last week Jeff named for us one major thing we are thankful for and that is the gift of Jesus Christ. Today we will focus on making a strong foundation of giving thanks, so it becomes a spiritual good habit in our lives.

In her book, “Grateful,” Diana Butler Bass shares that the first step to making a habit of gratitude is to “be aware of the blessings.”² To this effect, Diana took on the process on writing in a gratitude journal for three years. What she found was this practice helped her to “learn to see differently, and, as a result, act in ways that were more forgiving, just, and hopeful.”³ She said: “If we practice gratefulness, it becomes a natural and normal way of engaging the world.”⁴

So, it is with our faith. As we become more aware of God's blessings, our outlook on life will change for the better. Through our Scripture today from both the Old and New Testaments we see that we have a lot to be grateful for.

To understand the gravity of what God has done for us we have to start with the first covenant made with Moses and the Israelites. This covenant was two sided. God invited the people to follow the law that God set before them and the people agreed that they would. This covenant was sealed in blood as evidenced in Exodus 24:8: “Moses took the blood (of the sacrificed animals) and dashed it on the people, and said, ‘See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’”

In this moment we see the grace of God, extending this covenant to show love and commitment to his chosen people, the Israelites. But the Israelites had some bad habits. They complained a lot and they made idols for themselves to worship instead of God. They were unable to be obedient to God, and eventually they broke this covenant that they made with God.

In our Scripture from Jeremiah 34 we see God make a new covenant with the Israelites. This time God takes drastic measures and now writes the law on the hearts of the people so they will not forget. Commentary tells us: “The old covenant had been broken, but the new covenant will continue because of an inward transformation of the human heart that will allow the people to know God intimately and to be obedient to the commandments.”⁵

This Scripture reminds us that on our very hearts habits of gratitude are ingrained, if only we look for them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are alerted to God’s words on our hearts. In our moments of gratitude, we can clearly see who God is and who God always has been.

God continues to invite us into this same covenant through the blood of Jesus Christ. Just as the Mosaic covenant was sealed with blood, so was this new covenant through Jesus Christ. In Luke 22:20 Jesus says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

Jesus invites us into this new covenant with God, that we, too, would follow God’s commandments and embody our faith. Through the blood of Christ thanksgiving is also written in our hearts. Therefore, we call communion “The Great Thanksgiving.”

It is a time to remember what God has done for us through Jesus Christ and give thanks for this amazing sacrifice for our sins. It is one thing to know this in our minds and another to experience this moment of salvation in our hearts.

Last week Jeff Thompson shared some of his story and his coming to Christ moment which was really a process and journey. It is also a journey for all of us as we grow in our discipleship. When we truly understand what God has done for us every day our only response is worship and gratitude. To rediscover God’s word written on our hearts we are called to be more aware of how God is moving in our lives and in the world.

We can make a habit of gratitude when we take time out of our lives each day to thank God. How has this been going for you? I hope that these practices of prayer time and reading the psalms and doing a gratitude journal have been life giving for you.

This week I want to challenge you to something new: each day I want to you write one thing you are grateful for. It will be amazing to notice all the cumulative things that you are grateful for.

Another way that we can grow in our habits of gratitude is to model our faith after the Apostle Paul who would start his letters to the churches with: “I give thanks to God for you (Romans, 1 Corinthians).

Paul led with positivity and gratefulness. This is how he was able to convert so many people to Christianity. Who doesn’t want to hear a message like that especially in this day and age? Aren’t we more drawn to those who are encouraging and supportive instead of miserable and complaining?

We have already heard today what we can do to form our own habit of gratitude. The roadblock to following through on these habits are often other people around us. It is hard to be grateful when we are surrounded by a bunch of complainers.

Bowen explains, “The best way to get others to stop complaining is through redirection and not confrontation.”⁶ When you use this method you will find that others around you will not complain as much and neither will you!

The way we can combat all these types of complaints is through the instruction of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice.” When we are rejoicing in the hope of the resurrection in Jesus Christ, the things we complain about will not take priority in our lives.

I think this is what Paul meant by having the mind of Christ. In Philippians 4:7 he said, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

This is what the message today is all about. We must guard our thoughts and focus our minds on Christ. This is how we obtain the peace of Christ and let go of our complaining.

Instead of complaining, we are called to cultivate the habit of confessing. When we learn how to practice confession, we stop complaining and learn how to express our feelings in a healthy way that is edifying to God and other people. This sacred practice can be found in the book of James which calls us to “confess [our] sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that [we] may be healed.”

There is great healing in the act of confession. This is how we tell God we are sorry and ask for forgiveness. We practice this sacred act before Communion so we can come to the table with our hearts washed clean of sin. We are always called to confess our sins to God, and God will hear us and forgive us, but there is also great power and healing in confessing our sins to one another. This is part of God’s gift to us in the church. God gives us people who we can share our lives with our brokenness with, and they share Christ with us by loving us in spite of ourselves and in spite of our sins.

So, what is the difference between complaining and confessing? Think about the focus of your complaint. Usually our complaints are about other people who frustrate or annoy us. Confessing is about you and your heart. Complaining removes responsibility while confessing claims responsibility. Complaining keeps our focus on the past while confessing moves us towards the future. Complaining is about getting attention, confessing is about fostering healing. Complaining destroys relationships, confessing fosters reconciliation.

Confession is about your heart. It is how we can rediscover what God has already written on our hearts. It is about the things you have done that you are taking responsibility for...things that have taken you away from God and hurt other people. God calls us to confess to one another.

This week as you write down one thing you are grateful for each day; I invite you to share these blessings with someone. It can be the same person or someone different each day, but in sharing your blessings you will bless others.

The good news for our lives today is that God has already created habits of gratefulness within our hearts. It is up to us to clear away our complaints so that we can more clearly see how God is calling us to live.

As you go through your week starting tomorrow, continue to be aware of how much you are complaining. Be more aware of God’s blessings in your lives and find someone that you can confess to.

I have been so blessed by my best friend and accountability partner Ansley. We worked together at my previous church and have since become great friends. Ansley does not let me get away with complaining. She calls me to action; she calls me to be better than I think I can be. She calls me to be holy.

Today we thank God that we in the body of Christ continue to encourage each other to be grateful for all that God has done, is doing and will continue to do. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Will Bowen. “A Complaint Free World.” 2005. P. 16.

² Diana Butler Bass. “Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks.” Harper Collins. New York, NY. 2018. P. 54.

³ Ibid, P. 60.

⁴ Ibid. P. 62.

⁵ The Harper Collins Study Bible. Harper Collins: New York, NY. 1989. P. 1172.

⁶ Bowen. P. 125.